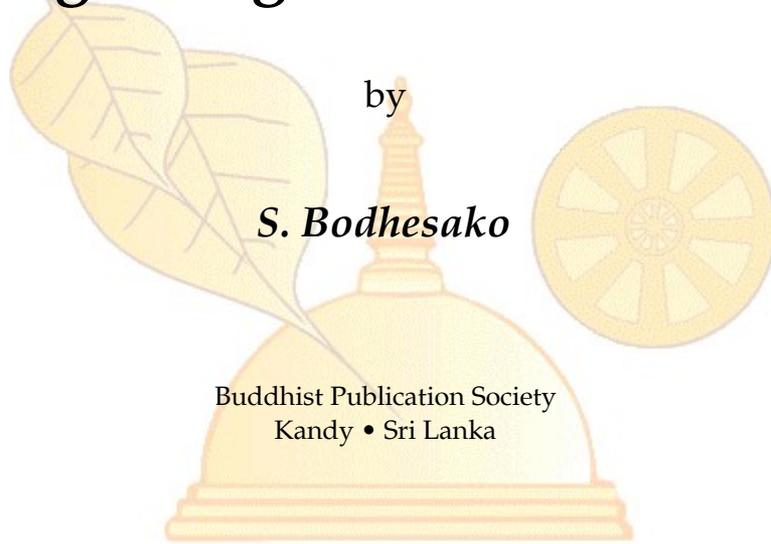


Beginnings: The Pali Suttas



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Respectfully dedicated to my Upajjhāya, Venerable Phra Somdet Nāṇasaṃvara

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Preface

A discussion of beginnings would be entirely unnecessary were it not that beginnings seem invariably to precede whatever conclusions may exist. It follows from this that if we hope to arrive at any conclusions in our lives then we must perforce begin. But where? The present work is concerned entirely with this question. Herein our discussion is, by design, twofold.

First, we will discuss the human situation, and the inherent need to discover a method, a way, whereby we may resolve the dilemma of that situation. This method must be coherent: we must have a standard whereby we can judge which actions will and which will not lead us towards a conclusion. Accepting a standard is, precisely, our beginning.

Second, we will discuss whether the collection of texts known as the Pāli Suttas might not offer such a standard. These texts, the oldest we have from among the various Buddhist schools, have much to recommend them. However, objections have been raised concerning their authenticity. These objections refer to the very origins and the early transmission of the Suttas. In order to evaluate these objections an understanding is needed of how these texts came into being and how they were passed on. This is the second sense in which we are concerned about beginnings.

Although this historical point occupies the bulk of our essay, it is thematically subservient to our primary question—Where does one begin?—and is relevant only to the extent that the primary question is seen to be relevant. This work, then, is not historical as such. Rather, it happens that an inquiry into the primary question turns out to involve an historical consideration.

The objection may be raised that any teaching which calls itself *akālika*, or non-temporal, as the Pāli Suttas do, can never be understood by raising an historical question, which is necessarily temporal. This of course is perfectly true. The problem of existence, in its very nature, can never be resolved by such a method. It is only through a non-historical approach—specifically, one that is personal, passionate, and persistent—that our perilous situation in the world can ever be comprehended. In this sense the only basis for judging the Suttas would be to put their advice into practice and resolve the personal dilemma, thereby coming to know for certain that the Suttas are what they claim to be. But herein we are not yet at the point of discussing how to *proceed*. We are still involved with the prior question of whether these Suttas offer a standard which, if acquiesced to, will lead to an end. And although an historical inquiry can never in itself lead us to a *conclusion*, it is at least possible that it might lead us to a *beginning* inasmuch as it can serve as an initial indication to our question: Where does one begin?

Except where otherwise noted, all factual information in this essay is garnered from the Pāli Suttas and their companion-piece, the Vinaya. In these texts we find accounts of the first months following the Buddha's awakening (Khandhaka I, Mahāvagga, Vinaya), of the final months before his decease (Sutta 16, Dīgha Nikāya),¹ of the events leading up to the First and Second Councils, together with an account of those Councils (Khandhakas XI and XII, Cullavagga, Vinaya), and, scattered through the texts, incidental information and clues about the middle period of the Buddha's ministry. Considerable additional information is available in texts of later date, such as the Commentaries. However, for our purposes such data are not needed, for though our account in no way contradicts the known facts available from primary sources, it is our intention to present here not a factual history but an imaginative one. We may recall the dictum: "Higher than actuality stands possibility." We are not attempting to set forth what *did* happen but what *must have happened*. Our account is more *reasoned* than *reportorial*. As such our methods are not those of scholars; nor do our conclusions rest upon ever finer points of contention, but rather upon a commonly-held understanding of how, in their broad outlines, things generally evolve: gradually and piecemeal rather than suddenly and definitively.

This is not to say that what follows will be of no interest to scholars. On the contrary, because of the broadness of the base upon which our findings rest, it is hoped that scholars may well regard

¹ Translated as *Last Days of the Buddha*, the Wheel Publication No. 67-69.

them as a significant as well as an original contribution to their discipline. However, an understanding of what follows requires no knowledge of or interest in scholarly questions. For most, perhaps, this account will be sufficient. For those who feel that they would benefit by further exploration into the substantial scholarly literature on the early history of Buddhism, this account can serve as a standard for evaluating the various conflicting views and judgments that are to be encountered therein. Avoiding those conflicts, we offer herein, using the data of the texts themselves, the most *reasonable* account of their beginnings and a *reasonable* assessment of how much confidence we can place in them, in order to make our own beginning.

Sutta references are to discourse number and, in parentheses, volume and page of the Pāli Text Society edition, except for Theragātha, Dhammapada and Sutta Nipāta, for which reference is to the verse number. Vinaya references are to the Khandhaka number of the Mahāvagga or Cullavagga, in Roman numerals, followed in Arabic numerals by subsection and paragraph as well as volume and page number.

Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Samyutta Nikāya (Roman numerals indicate <i>saṃyutta</i> number, according to P.T.S. enumeration.)
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Roman numerals indicate <i>nipāta</i> number)
Th	Theragātha
Dhp	Dhammapada
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Ud	Udāna

Beginnings: The Pāli Suttas

Where does one begin? This is obviously the first question. And when the issue at hand is the manifest need to explore and resolve the root-problem of our personal existence, then this question takes on a primacy in terms not only of sequence but of importance. One begins, of course, from where one is, for from where else can one begin? Herein the intelligent person, he who does not shrink from unpleasant truths, will acknowledge the problem. He may describe it in any of a number of ways—anxiety, loneliness, insufficiency, frustration, inconstancy, boredom, uncertainty, bondage, meaninglessness, impermanence, despair—but however it appears it will be seen, if it is seen at all, to be fundamental, for it is bound up in one way or another with a sense of one’s own mortality.

When we apprehend the ever-present possibility of our own immediate dying,—the impossible possibility, says Heidegger,—then any notions we may have about our golden and glittering prospects in the world will be seen to be illusory inasmuch as they, and we as well, end in death.² The gold is now seen for the leaden bondage that it really is, the alchemy has failed, and we see ourselves to be in perpetual subjugation to the uncertainty inherent in the world. And we then feel, deeply, the need to act.

There *must* be release from this overwhelming fact of our own mortality: we cannot believe otherwise. But, equally certain, we don’t know the way to that release else, surely, we would already have taken it. Can we find this way? Fine and earnest people have tried before us—that we know—and have admitted failure. Our task, then, cannot be easy. But having recognized our existence in this world as *inherently* unsatisfactory, we now sense the utter *necessity* of seeking the means to transcend it. We are unwilling to plunge yet again—again!—into that endless round of pastimes wherein most people waste their lives in the effort to avoid facing the truth of their own mortal existence. Although we don’t know the way ourselves, it is yet possible that there exists some teacher, some teaching, to provide guidance. And so we look about us, and we find... orators, teachers, therapists, hucksters, salvation-mongers, apostles, psychologists, preachers, gurus, swamis, saviors and salesmen by the score, each offering his own brand of salvation. And thus we arrive again at our original question: where does one begin?

They can’t *all* be right. If it were so easy, we would have no need of a teacher, for we and everyone else would already have done the work ourselves. Besides, many of these teachings, anti-teachings, disciplines, non-disciplines and weekends are manifestly in contradiction with one another (and sometimes even with themselves), both in doctrine and in practice. And therefore, unless we abandon consistency of both thought and effort, we must acknowledge the importance of choosing among them intelligently (unless we believe them to be uniformly *mistaken*, in which case the choice would again seem unimportant). For the choice we make will be our beginning, and from that beginning—made wisely or foolishly—everything else will follow.

Nor need we believe ourselves to be totally incompetent to make that choice. For although it is a truism that, as is sometimes argued, the only way to know for *certain* which teaching or teachings are in accordance with truth is to see truth for oneself, yet we can even now make a reasonable assessment of these teachings. To be unenlightened is not to know *nothing*; for were that the case we should not long survive in this uncertain world. We are free from confusion at least to the extent that we now see the need to free ourselves from it totally.³ Having acknowledged the problem, we can sort out from among those teachings which offer themselves to us those that at least address themselves to that problem from those that merely pander in one way or another to the world’s proclivity for any comfortable, or even uncomfortable, notion in order to avoid facing the problem. For underlying each

² “This body will perish; it’s old;
a nest of distress.
It breaks up, this putrid mold:
life ends in death.”—Dhp 148

³ “The fool who does his folly see
is a sage to that degree.
Who to sagacity gives airs,
that fool, he is 'A fool!' declared.”—Dhp 63

practice will be a doctrine or general attitude, and from this we can come to know the general nature of each teaching and can thereby separate the relevant from the superfluous. And thus it is that, eventually, we will come to the Buddha's Teaching.

The Buddha's Teaching

The Buddha's Teaching: what images it conjures—compassion, serenity, acquiescence, wisdom, bliss, selflessness. In such terms is it often described, even from afar, even among those who know only its general outlines. Such is the image of this Teaching that is in world-wide circulation; and with such qualities does it invite seekers of peace to take a closer look. With such a reputation it may perhaps prove to be the fount of advice and guidance we so need. And therefore we eagerly approach it, to find... Theravada Buddhism, Mahāyāna, Ch'an, Korean Zen, Vajrayāna, Tantric and dozens of other sects and sub-sects, large and small, new and old, all claiming to be the Teaching of the Buddha. And so it is that again we return to our original question: Where does one begin?

Are these schools different in name only? Or do they differ as well in attitude, approach, doctrine and practice? Is all one? Is all a diversity? Does nothing really exist? Does everything really exist? Or are these disparate views merely worldly wisdom, best abandoned in favor of seeing that "*Whatever* is arises dependent on conditions and is not without conditions"? Must we save others before we will be able to save ourselves? Or must we save ourselves before we will be in a position to save others? Is everything already perfect? Or is it only suffering that arises, suffering that ceases? Do we all have Buddha Nature? Or is all existence empty, without essence? Will we all eventually arrive at eternal salvation? Or do only those achieve liberation who see that all conditions are impermanent? Is *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāna*) to be found in *saṃsāra*, the round of existences, or are they mutually exclusive? What is the sound of one hand clapping?

If we accept that truth, whatever else it may be, is at least not self-contradictory, then the question necessarily arises: which among these paths, diverse and often at odds with one another, will offer us that way to liberation which we seek?⁴ And if these teachings *are* all different—or even if they are *not*—which of them is that Teaching set forth 2,500 years ago by a certain member of the Gotama family of the Sakyan clan, in northern India, known today as the Awakened One, the Buddha? If it were only possible to come to a reasonable judgment on this point, then we might be able with one stroke to cut through the tangle of confusion we meet with when we inquire into the nature of "Buddhism." For we will then find—if the Teaching lives up to its reputation—one coherent, sufficient and, above all, *relevant* Teaching which can serve as a standard in our inquiry into the nature of our mortal existence. And perhaps this is possible.

We know that the Pāli Suttas—the discourses in the Pāli language—are acknowledged by all Buddhist schools to be the oldest record we have of the Buddha's Teaching. We know that nearly a century ago the scholars of the West performed an about-face from their original majority position and now fully acknowledge the primacy, as regards age, of those Suttas. But we also know that certain objections have been raised with regard to the origin and transmission of those discourses. Are these objections valid? What is the difference here, if any, between "oldest" and "original"? How trustworthy are these texts as we now have them? With what degree of confidence are we able to ascertain the truth of the matter? Fortunately, it is possible to know, with reasonable confidence, the way in which these texts were first gathered together and then handed down to us. Let us inquire.

⁴ If one does *not* accept that truth is at least consistent with itself—i.e., that truth is not false—then this question will *not* arise. Instead, one will remain lost in one's inconsistencies and will fail to see that coherent movement wherein one can achieve freedom from confusion and anxiety.

Syncretism?

It may be objected at this point (or even sooner) that all this *inquiry* is absurd and that the “obvious” approach, for goodness sake, is to take *whatever* is useful *wherever* we find it and to get on with the thing already instead of dancing about the starting line for, after all, truth isn’t the exclusive preserve of any one narrow sectarian doctrine, is it? And this eclectic attitude sounds very good until one *tries* to “get on with the thing” by *taking* “whatever is useful” etc., for it is at precisely this point—the point of beginning—that the question arises: what is useful? And what merely seems to our blind eyes to be so? Without a standard we would be unable to choose between meditation, ascetic austerities, prayers to the heavens, or snake-charming as paths to liberation. It is precisely this—a standard—that we felt ourselves to be in need of when we decided to seek guidance beyond our personal opinions and judgments.

Although the question of *specific* doctrines lies outside our present inquiry (for we are not yet well-placed to make the necessary distinctions), something can nevertheless be said about the *approach* to specific doctrines, i.e. making a beginning. Here the question is not “*Where* does one begin?” but “*How* does one begin?”: perhaps the question that immediately follows upon “*Where?*” and which is still prior to any actual beginning. And there seem to be two general answers to this question, *How* does one begin?, which we can conveniently label as the “smorgasbord” approach and the “crystalline” approach.

In the syncretic smorgasbord approach one views spiritual teachings as if they were a smorgasbord spread out on an enormous table, to be partaken of by all who seek spiritual sustenance. The seeker, plate in hand, helps himself to whatever he cares to, in whatever quantity and variety appeals to him—let’s see now, a bit of TM on toast, some Karma Yoga and coleslaw, a dash of Sufism for spice, a bit of this, a bit of that—and if he has chosen wisely, he will consume, spiritually, a satisfying and nutritious blend which—who knows—just *might* lead to....

The crystalline approach, on the other hand, assumes that no truth can be more consistent or relevant than the teaching by which it is revealed, and that therefore a teaching that truly *leads*—i.e. is one-pointed and consistent rather than an amorphous collection of spiritualisms—is akin to a many-faceted crystal, wherein each facet may reflect its own prismatic colors, but each is nonetheless inseparable from the crystal as a whole, for the crystal, being an organic unity, is indivisible. In this approach there can be no pick-and-choose attitude, for to fragment such a teaching is to miss its holistic essence. In such a case, having once made the decision that this is the standard we choose to follow, we will thereupon voluntarily subjugate our personal preferences in favor of the advice of our teaching, *even when it is directly contrary to our own wishes*. This does not preclude taking “whatever is useful.” Rather, it gives us a basis for judging what is and is not useful. And if it should happen that within our chosen teaching we already find all that we need in order to “get on with it”, then so much the better.

But if the charge of narrowness is nonetheless made, then we will note first that an arrow that is broad and wide is far less likely to hit its mark than one that is properly shaped for one-pointed flight; and second that the charge of narrowness is made without understanding. For no point of view can be understood except from its own frame of reference, an observation which already suggests the crystalline approach, for all that it is true of syncretistic views as well.⁵ It is most commonly the case that people do not question the assumptions that underlie their own basic attitudes—after all, it’s obvious, isn’t it?—but until they do so, they will be necessarily unable to understand a point of view that does not arise from those assumptions except from within their own viewpoint, which is to say that they will not be able to understand it at all. And the charge of narrowness is made from the syncretistic point of view without comprehending the crystalline point of view.

⁵ An extreme extension of the eclectic, smorgasbord view, common enough nowadays, is that “all teachings lead to a common goal” or, at least, that the *deepest* teachings (= “those I most approve of”) do. A discussion of this idea is beyond our scope; but since this view so accords with the spirit of the times that it is particularly liable to be accepted uncritically, it is worthwhile to note that if (as is the case) it is a mistaken view, then its adoption would be an insurmountable barrier to realization of that which transcends what is common.

The collection of discourses known as the Pāli Suttas wholeheartedly recommends itself to the concerned individual as being that guidance to the transcendental which he seeks. They inform the seeker firstly that his life-problem arises dependent for its condition upon a wrong view of things, and secondly that a right view, which would undermine and end that problem, is to be achieved by following right-view guidance, namely, the training-course set forth by the Buddha. There can be no doubt after even a brief look at these texts that they staunchly advocate the crystalline approach towards liberation. In many ways do they declare themselves to be all-of-a-piece,⁶ a Teaching not to be understood by taking from it according to personal preference.⁷ Therefore when inquiring into the Pāli Suttas it is a necessity, if one hopes to understand what is meant therein by “right view”, to adopt the crystalline approach, and we do so here.

Beginnings

The Pāli Suttas have their beginning in the Deer Park at Sarnath, not far from Benares (present-day Vārānasi), where the Buddha first taught to others that which he had himself already realized through proper attention and right effort. The five monks who heard that first discourse would have had to pay close attention in order for understanding to arise. Thus, when they were thereby led to see for themselves that which the Buddha had already seen—“whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease”—they would not forget the words which had so stirred them. Having now overcome—at last!—that aversion to seeing (as it actually is, rather than—mistakenly—as something else,) what had always been *there* to be seen, they would naturally delight in those words which had led them to this release from the inner tension of that aversion and, delighting therein,⁸ they would remember them well⁹. They might for their own pleasure call to mind what they had heard; they might for their mutual pleasure repeat it to each other¹⁰—as we ourselves might often recall and recount something which has given us delight—but they would not yet be doing so in order to instruct; for there was as yet but one teacher: the Buddha. All that was taught was what he taught; and there was therefore as yet no variance in the expression of that Teaching.

There came a time—probably a few weeks later—when as many as sixty, having been instructed, had come to full realization and now lived the holy life (*brahmacariya*) fulfilled as monks in the Buddha’s Order. It was at this time that the Buddha spoke his oft-quoted instructions:

“Monks, I am freed from all shackles, both heavenly and human. Monks, you too are freed from both heavenly and human shackles. Wander, monks, for the benefit, the happiness of the manyfolk, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of royalty and men. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Teaching, monks, that in both word and spirit is wholesome in its beginning, wholesome its middle, wholesome in its conclusion. Proclaim a holy life that is utterly

⁶ E.g.: “Monks, just as the great ocean has but one flavor, the flavor of salt, so too this Teaching has but one flavor, the flavor of freedom.”—Cullavagga 9.1.4/Vin II 236 = AN 8:19 (IV 199) = Ud 5.5/56.

⁷ E.g.: “Monks, even with a teacher who dwells giving importance to material things, an heir to material things, conjoined with material things, haggling such as this would be untenable: ‘If we have it so, then we will do it; if we don’t have it so, then we won’t do it.’ What then, of a Perfect One who dwells unentangled with material things? Monks, a faithful disciple, having scrutinized the teacher’s advice, proceeds in accordance with this: ‘The Exalted One is the teacher. I am the disciple. The Exalted One knows. I do not know.’”—MN 70/M I 480: Kīṭāgiri Sutta. Numerous additional passages could be quoted to support the two texts above; but perhaps it is not necessary to belabour the point: those who require more evidence can find it themselves, by going to the Suttas.

⁸ “...while being taught the Teaching for the ceasing of personality (*sakkāyanirodha*) he whose heart neither springs forward nor is made serene nor is composed, he is not freed...”—MN 64/M I 435)

⁹ This discourse and that by which the five achieved full liberation have been preserved for us. The intervening discourses, by which they grew in the Teaching, though referred to, have not been preserved.

¹⁰ “...and those monks who are worthy ones with cankers destroyed, endowed with perfection, having done what should be done, laid down the burden, achieved the goal, fully destroyed the fetters of being, freed by right comprehension—they, on hearing the Teaching, dwell pleasantly here and now.”—AN 9:4/A IV 362-3.

perfect and pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who, not hearing the Teaching, will be lost. But some will understand...¹¹

Thus the monks dispersed, to teach according to their individual abilities and proclivities¹². At first they may have repeated, for the most part, what they remembered. Surely they would differ in what they recalled. Surely they would differ in what they chose to repeat. Here a discourse would be repeated only in summary; there it would be given in full; elsewhere it would be expanded and expounded upon. As the monks gained in communicative skills, as they learned to recognize which facets of the Teaching best suited various auditors, they would—at least some of them—have supplemented or supplanted the remembered words of the Buddha with their own descriptions of “the way things are”, and many discourses by disciples have been preserved for us. The insight would be the same, but the descriptions would differ, depending on both the occasion and the individuals¹³. And thus as the Teaching spread there would have been, unavoidably, a growing diversity in what was taught and remembered.

It could not have been long before there came to be monks in the Order who, though earnest, had not yet seen the Teaching for themselves. These would not have taken the same delight in the discourses as those whose insight had penetrated the Teaching thoroughly. Nor would they have had the same faculties for remembering them, for knowing the essentials, and for avoiding *mis*-remembering them. And hence there arose the need not only for listening but for *learning*. For unless the talks were memorized—in those days there was neither paper nor ink—those new monks might have, between themselves, exchanged naught but misconceptions and, in solitude, foundered in confusion. Thus we find throughout the Suttas dozens of passages in which the need for learning, repeating and committing to memory is stressed and praise is given those with such learning, usually with the warning that mere learning, without application is inadequate¹⁴.

There were some who excelled at teaching, who were particularly inclined to do so, and who possessed those outward qualities which attract followings. Thus there arose large companies of monks each of which became separated from the others both by geography and by lifestyle. Some were forest dwellers, others lived near a town; some were sedentary, others roamed about and so on according to the preferences of each teacher. Many monks, of course, did not join companies: after completing the training, they went off and spent the rest of their lives in solitude or with a few like minded companions. These monks certainly fulfilled the Buddha’s Teaching, but they would have played no role in the gathering and preserving of the outward expression of that Teaching, etc., and are not further considered in this account.

Each company would have developed its own body of memorized discourses, with its own framework of summations and expansions, each group of teachings possessed of its own set phrases, conventions, and methods of exposition. Certain aspects of this variance and diversity would have been, among the as-yet-unenlightened, a source for confusion and disagreements. Indeed, some of these differences have been recorded. See, for example, the Bahuvedanīya Sutta, MN 59/M I 396–400

¹¹ Mahāvagga 1.11/Vin I 20-21 = SN 4:5/S I 105-6.

¹² It is worth noting that the ability to teach does not follow automatically upon perception of truth, nor are all enlightened ones equally skilled in communication. See AN 1:14/A I 23-5. Worldly or social skills have no particular relevance to achievement of that which transcends society and the world, except insofar as a talent for such skills may hamper one’s perception of the need to surpass them.

¹³ See SN 35:204/S IV 91-95, wherein four monks give four different answers, all commendable by the wise, to the question, “To what extent is vision well-purified?” See also the Mahā Gosīṅga Sutta, MN 32/M I 212-29.

¹⁴ E.g. Venerable Ānanda: “Here, friend Sāriputta, a monk has mastered the Teaching...; the Teaching thus heard, thus mastered, he teaches to others in detail, he makes others recite in detail, he makes them repeat in detail. The Teaching thus heard, thus mastered, he thinks and ponders upon in his heart and considers by mind. In whatever lodgings dwell monks who are learned, going by the rule, keepers of the Teaching, of the Discipline, of the Summaries, he comes to those lodgings (to stay) for the rainy-season (retreat). Approaching them from time to time he inquires and questions (of those monks): ‘Sir, what is the purpose of this talk?’ Those venerable ones disclose to him the undisclosed, make clear the unclear, dispel doubt regarding multifarious doubtful things. In this way, friend Sāriputta, a monk may hear a Teaching he has not heard; and Teachings he has (already) heard will become unconfused; and those earlier Teachings which had formerly touched his heart occur to him; and he recognizes what was unrecognized.”—AN 6:51/A III 361-2. See also MN 32/M I 213.

= SN 36:19/IV 223–28, wherein the Buddha settles a doctrinal dispute by explaining how it is that the various teachings he has set forth about feelings are, though different, not contradictory.

The Teaching was at this time established; it was well-remembered; it had spread. But it was as yet uncoordinated, unstandardized; it was as yet not gathered together.

The Venerable Ānanda

Within the first year after the Buddha's enlightenment, there entered the Order that individual who, apart from the Buddha himself, was best equipped to influence the development of the Suttas as an organized body of teachings, and to whom we therefore owe an immense debt. Without Venerable Ānanda it is possible that we would not have the Suttas today at all.

Venerable Ānanda, cousin of the Buddha, went forth from the lay life not long after the Buddha had visited his kinsmen, the Sakyans, at Kapilavatthu, where both had grown up; and from the time of his going forth it would seem that Venerable Ānanda spent most of his time near the Buddha. Indeed, for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's ministry Venerable Ānanda served as the Buddha's devoted personal attendant, following him "like a shadow"—Th 1041-1043. He did many services for the Buddha, and he also did one for us: he listened.

At that time many people called on the Buddha: monks and nuns, lay followers, kings and ministers, even adherents of other teachers. Some asked for guidance or explanations, some made conversation or put to him prepared questions just to hear what the Buddha might say, and some even challenged and debated with him. To all, the Buddha taught about suffering and about the way to put an end to suffering. Some of these people became enlightened¹⁵ right then and there, while listening to the Buddha: MN 140 (IiI 247), etc. Others would bear in mind what had been said and, thinking it over and applying it, would achieve enlightenment at some later time: AN 8:30 (IV 228–35), etc. Still others never succeeded to this extent but improved themselves and obtained a bright rebirth: SN 40:10 (IV 269–80), etc. And some, of course, went away without having benefited at all by their meeting: MN 18 (I 109), etc.

To all these people the Buddha spoke only about suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering, but he did so in many different ways, explaining himself using various approaches. We must all begin from where we are; but we are not all in the same place, spiritually, when we begin. Different people will respond to different forms of expression. It is important to remember, when reading these Suttas, that they were not spoken in a vacuum: there was an actual person, or people, sitting before the Buddha, and what the Buddha said was spoken with the aim of resolving a particular conflict, usually internal. If we forget this point, we leave ourselves open to the danger of misconceiving the Teaching in mechanistic terms as an impersonal explanation rather than as good advice on how to live, and on how to develop a view of things that is free from attachment and unhappiness.

So the Buddha explained about ignorance, conceit and suffering in many different ways; and Ānanda was there. And he not only listened, he also remembered. So he did two services for us.

Among the monks the custom arose of teaching each other their favorite discourses through the techniques of sequential and simultaneous recitation (practices still found today). Venerable Ānanda took a particular interest in talks worthy of preservation, and with his quick wits¹⁶ he learned many discourses delivered by his fellow monks, as well as those given by the Buddha, thereby increasing his value as a repository of the Teaching¹⁷. Since, further, he was well known as a monk who had

¹⁵ In this essay the word "enlightened" is used of the *sekha*—see below—as well as of the arahat, the latter being described as not only enlightened but also liberated.

¹⁶ At AN I:14/A I 24 is recorded the Buddha's declaration of Venerable Ānanda as being foremost, among all monks, both in wide knowledge and in retentive memory, as well as in good conduct, resoluteness, and personal service.

¹⁷ In the Theragāthā (v. 1024) Venerable Ānanda says that he knew 82,000 of the Buddha's discourses (as well as 2,000 by the monks). This works out, over a vigorous forty-five year ministry, to nearly five discourses a day. This is sizable, but many of them are but a few lines, so it is not impossible. However, we should bear in mind that the numerical precision so highly valued in Western culture has been (and is yet) of little importance in

heard much, learned much, and was approachable, willing to help whenever he could, there can be no doubt that he was often asked by others to teach them discourses or just to recite them so that they might be heard. So he taught others—e.g. SN 22:90 (IiI 133–4); AN 9:42 (IV 449)—and helped to spread the Teaching among both his contemporaries and those who followed after. This is a third service by which we are indebted to Venerable Ānanda.

The question had to arise: in what form should these discourses be taught? Clearly they could not include every word that had been spoken¹⁸—at least not in the case of every single Sutta—lest the learning become so cumbersome as to be self-defeating. Although mindfulness is central to the practice of the Buddha’s Teaching (SN 46:53 (V 115)), monks were not all equally gifted in the ability to memorize: the discourses had to be put into a format conducive to their being accurately remembered, while at the same time preserving their essence as teachings.

The solution that was chosen¹⁹ was to remove superfluous matters, to condense what had been said, to crystallize those aspects of the Teaching which are found repeatedly—the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the method of right conduct, restraint of the faculties, mindfulness, the various levels of meditation, the five aggregates, dependent origination, and so on—into the most concise descriptions possible, to couch the whole of this into a set pattern conducive to memorization, and to introduce as much repetition and re-iteration as possible. A typical Sutta, then, will begin by telling where the discourse took place, it will introduce the person or persons concerned and provide us with any other information necessary; then the theme will be stated concisely; each aspect of the theme will then be brought forward in its turn, repeated, developed (with a copious use of synonyms,) expanded, summarized and re-iterated. Similes may be introduced, in which case by means of parallel construction with the subject matter their relevance will be unmistakable. Each possible permutation will be dealt with in turn, the opening thematic statement will be recapitulated, and the Sutta will then conclude with remarks usually of approval and pleasure. The purpose is clear: to make absolutely certain that the matter at hand is stated so clearly that an intelligent person, open-minded, willing to listen, not bent on his own views, could not possibly misunderstand.²⁰ Thus the arising of stock material and techniques, and also their spread, as they came into usage among the various companies of monks that flourished, took place during (and not only after) the Buddha’s ministry—although, as we shall see, their influence was with limitations: there were those companies that kept to their own forms.

Some find the Suttas, with all of their re-iteration, excruciatingly boring. “This,” they suggest, “could hardly be the message of a Fully Enlightened One.” They suppose that because they themselves are not enthralled that therefore the message cannot be that of a Buddha. Not only do they fault the method, but the message as well; for were the message—renunciation—delightful to them, its repetition would hardly be objectionable. But when the idea of non-attachment is appreciated and approved of, then in both their message and their method the Suttas will be found to be both memorable and rememberable.²¹

Indian culture: these figures are best understood as “a very great many.” In India a different sort of precision—Ānanda’s—was valued. (See AN 10:95/A V 193-5.)

¹⁸ And, clearly, they do not. For example, in the Culla Saccaka Sutta, MN 35/M I 227-37, we are given the account of a talk between the Buddha and Saccaka, who had previously boasted that in debate he would make the Buddha shake, shiver, tremble and sweat. We expect that in the face of such superior wisdom Saccaka will be reduced to silence and dismay; but in the text it requires but four pages of print to accomplish this. Surely Saccaka was a worthier opponent, with sufficient experience and skills at “eel-wriggling” (*amarāvikkhepa*) to last longer than that! We must suppose that the actual talk was of greater length, and that the text gives us but the gist of what was said.

¹⁹ As to *how* it was chosen we are given no hint: the Suttas say nothing in this regard. Our information is derived entirely from the results: the Suttas are in fact constructed in the way described.

²⁰ “Monks, these five things lead to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching. Which five? Here, monks, the monks master a well-grasped discourse, well laid down by word and line. Monks, of what is well laid down, the purpose is well followed. This, monks, is the first thing that leads to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching...”—AN 5:156/A III 179.

²¹ This, however, is in no way an objection to condensations of printed translations—intended for *readers* rather than *listeners*—for the sake of economy of space.

The Four Nikāyas

Each company had its own core of favorite Suttas, which newcomers would learn at least in part. Some of these discourses would be derived from talks by the company's own teacher or stories of local monastic history; others would be drawn from the stock common to all groups. Thus we would expect few companies—probably none—not to have within their ranks those who could recite one version or another of such standard texts as deal in full or in brief with “the gradual teaching,” “the foundations of mindfulness,” and so on. However, we would also expect that from the common pool each company would choose largely not only those discourses whose subject matter appealed to them but also the type of discourse that appealed to them. Thus some groups would learn brief and pithy sayings while others would prefer discourses which developed their subject matter in detail. Still others would gravitate towards texts in which subject matter was intertwined with character and event, resulting in a story-form. This latter sort of text would have particularly appealed on two grounds to monks living near villages or towns. First, such monks would have had the leisure to learn these generally longer Suttas (for life near the towns is easier than life in remote jungle thickets); and second, when the laity would assemble on the new- and full-moon observance days, they would find such Suttas more interesting to listen to than those with little characterization and story. Hence it is the case that the collection of discourses which are long (called the *Dīgha Nikāya*) does in fact address itself to matters of concern to the laity far more frequently than any of the other collections. Indeed, nearly half the discourses in this collection are addressed to laypeople, and in most others layfolk play a significant role.

Life in the forest is not as easy as life near a town. Aside from time devoted to meditation, there are many time-consuming chores. Forest monks would have less time for the learning of long discourses and perhaps, less inclination: not only are forest monks often more given to meditation than are village monks, they are also less frequently visited by laypeople, and therefore have less need to accommodate lay interests. Many of them, however, would wish to know discourses which dealt instructively in detail with a subject. Thus, one who is practicing (say) perception of emptiness would likely find it worthwhile to learn at least one of the discourses which develops this theme²². Many forest monks would wish to have at hand, for reference in their practice as well as for the joy of associating with the Good Teaching (*saddhamma*), discourses that consisted of something more than a pithy saying, but which yet were more concerned with instruction than with story and characterization. They would learn Suttas of a moderate length, and they would choose subject matter in accordance with the interests they were pursuing. Hence there is a collection of discourses which are of middle length (*Majjhima Nikāya*), rich in variety of subject matter, but of less immediate relevance to the concerns of the laity than the longer discourses, and in which the laity play a much smaller role, hardly a quarter of these talks are addressed to laypeople.

Naturally, many teachers taught by way of a particular subject, such as the practice of reflection in regard to, e.g., the sense faculties, or the holding aggregates, or feelings, etc. As today, then too the followers of each teacher would of course take particular interest in learning discourses that pertained to the subject that concerned them or to some other point of interest: nuns would learn discourses involving nuns; the monks living in the forest of Kosala would remember events and talks which took place there, and so on. Hence there tended to coalesce, with no planning necessary, collections of discourses grouped according to subject matter, and today these exist as the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

We see, as we inquire into the Buddha's Teaching, that it is much given to enumeration: three kinds of feeling, four right efforts, five powers, six senses, seven factors of enlightenment, the eightfold path, and so on. This may be regarded as a device to serve both mnemonic and pedagogical purposes. Thus, the meditation levels known as *jhānas* are almost always enumerated as four and almost always described in accordance with a set pattern. That they need not be so enumerated and described is suggested by among others the *Upakkilesa Sutta*, MN 138 (IiI 162) (among others), wherein the same range of concentrative attainments is described in six stages. Again, the usual description of those who have seen truth but not yet achieved full purification (i.e. the *sekha*, trainee,

²² “... Because, Ānanda, it is empty of self or of what pertains to self, therefore it is said, 'The world is empty.'”—SN 35:85/S IV 54.

or *ariyasāvaka*, noble disciple) is three-fold (viz., Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner); but at AN 9:12 (IV 380–1) we are given a nine-fold division. That these categories are in fact not invariably described according to their usual formulations is strong evidence that they need not be. (Again, higher than actuality stands possibility.) Since the purpose of the Buddha’s Teaching is neither to classify nor to analyze but to lead one to see something about oneself, classification is used only for its mnemonic and pedagogical value (though herein its value is great). There are discourses which teach non-attachment to feeling (and other aspects of experience) without making any enumerations: SN 12:12 (Ii 13); 36:4 (IV 206–7); 36:21 (IV 230–1), etc. The stock descriptions are commonly given because it was found to be generally easier, both as an aid to memory and in the service of one’s own practice, to use them as such. It would be expected, then, that some monks would avail themselves of this numerical device (which is an Indian literary style also found in non-Buddhist texts: the Jaina *Ṭhānāṅga* is an example) and so would learn discourses according to the number of items discussed. Hence today there exists a collection of discourses arranged numerically, up to eleven: the Aṅguttara Nikāya²³.

We can see, then, that even during the life of the Buddha these discourses were not distributed randomly: already they must have been organized, in an embryonic form, along the lines in which we now have them. Indeed, the texts themselves refer—AN 3:20 (I 117) etc.—to *dharmadhara*, *vinayadhara*, *mātikādhara*, or those who keep (= learn) the Teaching, those who keep the Discipline, and those who keep the Summaries, i.e. the Pātimokkha. Their formal organization would not have been a radical and innovative leap, but the logical next step in a process that had already developed to some extent.

However, the Suttas were probably not formally organized into Nikāyas during the Buddha’s lifetime. During that time the Canon was still decidedly open and growing. When they became unwieldy in volume, then no doubt some loose organization was evolved—“Let *this* company learn *these* discourses; let *that* company learn *those* discourses”—but any formal structure would have been continuously interrupted, requiring recomposition in order to accommodate popular and important new discourses. Thus the Suttas never refer to themselves in terms of the Nikāyas that we now have. Rather, we find fairly often a nine-fold division of the texts: discourses, mixed prose and verse, expositions, verses, solemn utterances, sayings, birth stories, marvels, catechisms (*sutta*, *geyya*, *veyyākaraṇa*, *gātha*, *udāna*, *itivuttaka*, *jātaka*, *abbhūtaḍḍhamma*, *vedalla*—MN 22 (I 133), etc. This is not to suggest that the texts were ever organized along this nine-fold division. The classification is probably taken from the broad tradition of monasticism existent at that time²⁴. This tradition no doubt included criteria according to which teachings could be judged, and the texts sometimes demonstrate (often to non-Buddhist ascetics, e.g. the wanderer, later Venerable Vacchagotta, at MN 73/M I 489–97) that the Teaching was complete in all its parts as judged by these standards (see also AN 7:55/A IV 82–84). But the use of this nine-fold classification shows that the texts do, in fact, describe themselves. Therefore their failure to do so in terms of Nikāyas demonstrates that such a division did not come into existence until after the Canon was no longer fully open, i.e. after the Buddha’s decease.

²³ In addition to the four Nikāyas described above, there is a fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya. However, it will be convenient to discuss its growth later, inasmuch as it is of later growth. For now we will consider only the four great Nikāyas.

²⁴ As are certain other Canonical technical terms: *jhāna*, for instance, which was certainly known to the Jains—see SN 41:8/S IV 298—and to such outside teachers as Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta—MN 26/M I 164–5. Convincing evidence could be cited for a number of other terms as well.

The First Council

“Come, friends: let us recite the Teaching and the Discipline before what is not the Teaching shines forth and the Teaching is put aside, before what is not the Discipline shines forth and the Discipline is put aside, before those who speak what is not the Teaching become strong and those who speak what is the Teaching become weak, before those who speak what is not the Discipline become strong and those who speak what is the Discipline become weak.”²⁵

Thus, a few months after the Buddha’s decease a meeting now known as the First Council was held in the hills outside of Rājagaha (modern Rajgir, in Bihar) in order to put the Vinaya and the Suttas into a formal structure for the sake of those who would come later, i.e., us. Venerable Upāli, who had gone forth at the same time as Venerable Ānanda, was designated responsible for the Vinaya, as was Venerable Ānanda for the Suttas. The account of their stewardships consists of but a few lines of reportage, probably edited long after the event—most likely together with the account of the Second Council, the report of which seems to be much more contemporaneous with its subject matter.

The evidence is twofold. First, we would expect the Cullavagga to have, if not fewer, at least not more Khandhakas than the Mahāvagga. In the Suttas we often encounter Mahā/Cula pairs, and the Mahā is invariably the longer. At any rate the Tenth Khandhaka of the Cullavagga is concerned with the nuns. It would be inconsistent with attitudes displayed elsewhere in the texts for the nuns’ disciplinary matters to be placed ahead of the monks’ concerns, particularly such an important concern as the Council. Therefore, the account of the Councils must have been appended at a time when the Vinaya was already considered closed to interpolations. Indeed, the account of the Councils was almost certainly the final addition to the Vinaya texts.

Second, it is said in Khandhaka XI that Venerable Ānanda recited the *five Nikāyas*. Therefore the account could not have been edited until a time when the five Nikāyas actually existed. Since the Suttas never refer to themselves as consisting of Nikāyas at all, let alone as five, if we were to assume the account to be contemporary, we would be forced to suppose that this classification came into being quite dramatically. It is more reasonable to suppose that a body of material existed which, though not formally included in the First Council compilation, adhered to it as supplementary matter; that that material must have included an account of the Council itself; and that it, as well as certain other materials, eventually came to be included in the Canon before the Canon itself was regarded as closed. The account was included at a time when the five Nikāyas already existed as formally organized bodies of texts, but probably was codified quite soon after, for the specification of the number *five* suggests an attempt to legitimize the last of them, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Be that as it may, it is not difficult, despite the brevity of the reportage, to imagine what must have taken place. The Council was no mere recitation of texts: that had been going on for forty-five years and did not require a special assembly. The Council’s aim must have been two-fold:

- 1) To decide what, out of the vast store of material at hand, should be given the protection of formal organization; and
- 2) To set up a mechanism to preserve this material.

Obviously it couldn’t *all* be saved. Not only were there the Buddha’s discourses, all 82,000 of them (or so),²⁶ but also the discourses of many other monks, some of them learned, wise, enlightened, liberated. Some of the discourses were duplicates—the monks from Sāvattthī remembering the Buddha saying such-and-such when he was there; the monks from Kusināra remembering him saying quite the same thing on a visit to them—others varied in greater or lesser extent. Some

²⁵ So Venerable Mahā Kassapa, the elected head of the First Council. Cullavagga XI.1.1 (II 284)

²⁶ We noted earlier (footnote 15) that Venerable Ānanda knew 84,000 discourses. The four Nikāyas as we now have them— sixteen volumes; 5,500 pages in their abbreviated roman-script edition—contain according to the Commentarial reckoning a total of 17,505 discourses (some are quite short). Though the precise number of discourses is problematical, we can see that in any case what was included, voluminous as it is, is but a fraction of what was available.

variations were revealing, others perhaps less so. These elders wanted this discourse included, those elders had other requests. In addition to the formal discourses there were events of some significance: the famine in Verañjā and its effects on the Order, Devadatta's attempt at a schism, an attempt on Venerable Sāriputta's life (Ud 4.4/39–41)), and so on. Which of these were worthy of preservation? Which would be of less value to those who came later? How much was enough, and how much too much? These decisions were, with regard to the Suttas, Venerable Ānanda's responsibility as, with regard to the Vinaya, they were Venerable Upāli's.

The selection being made, it was then necessary to assign to different teachers the responsibility of learning and passing on a certain portion of a collection; for even among the august members of the Council—there were 500 elders, we are told, “not one more, not one less,” and all were liberated—few would have been able to learn the Suttas in their entirety. If one-hundred of them took responsibility for the Vinaya, there would have been one-hundred each for the long discourses, the middle length discourses, the grouped collection, and the enumerated collection²⁷. Even though most monks could take responsibility for passing on to their following no more than a portion of a collection, yet every part of this organized recension would have been the responsibility of a large number of schools. Thus, if one or several schools died out, their tradition would not thereby be lost.

(A digression here on the question of memory may be worthwhile. Literate people sometimes express doubt that large segments of text could have been accurately remembered during the five centuries before they were first written down. But anthropologists have often remarked on the extraordinary and proven ability of their non-literate informants to remember accurately. It would seem that the comparatively poor memory of literate folk is due to their very literacy: they don't *need* to cultivate the faculty of memory. They forget (if they ever knew) that like all faculties, if they don't use it they lose it. In literate cultures that part of experience that is not readily recordable tends to become impoverished: literacy is not without its drawbacks.

(Although Venerable Ānanda was pre-eminent in the ability to learn discourses apparently possessing what today is called a “photographic memory”, the ability to remember segments of texts which, in print, take up a volume or more, was not an unusual ability. Even today, when we have authoritative editions of all the texts printed in a variety of scripts, the ability is not unheard of.

(In Burma government-regulated examinations are offered monks annually to test their recall of the texts, as well as their understanding of them. At present (1983) there are in Burma alone four monks who have demonstrated their ability to recite by memory not only the Vinaya and Sutta collections in their entirety, both of which are more voluminous today than in their original First Council recension, but also the seven volumes of the (later) Abhidhamma. Since 1949 when the examinations were first offered, 67 monks have passed the oral and written examinations for the five volumes of the Vinaya and 265 have done so for the Suttas comprising sixteen volumes. Additionally, well over 300 monks have passed oral and written examinations proving their perfect recall and understanding of one entire Nikāya (Dīgha: 122; Majjhima: 89; Saṃyutta: 52; Aṅguttara: 55). The number who can recite large portions of a Nikāya—a volume or more—must be substantially higher. In Sri Lanka, where recitation is also greatly valued but where, however, examinations are not offered, one can find many more such reciters²⁸.)

(When we remember that the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness is a central discipline in the Buddha's Teaching, that the Suttas were arranged in as mnemonic a manner as possible, that monks were encouraged to review often the discourses in their minds and that they were expected to meet frequently for group rehearsals, both within their own company and together with other companies, we will not be surprised that at a time when memorization was the only way to transmit the Teaching, such an ability, assiduously fostered, would be widespread and reliable. It will be seen, then, that it was not (as is often asserted) due to the writing down of the texts that they achieved their

²⁷ These figures—other than the “500”—are entirely speculative. Their purpose is only to demonstrate that, whatever the specific details, a mechanism for preserving the texts was entirely feasible. However, the Commentarial assertion—*Sumaṅgalavilāsini* I,13—that primary responsibility for these four collections was assigned respectively to Venerable Ānanda, the pupils of Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahā Kassapa and Venerable Anuruddha, lends support to our suggestion.

²⁸ Data courtesy Religious Affairs Department, Rangoon.

definitive form. Well before that time, when they had come to be regarded as sacred, there already existed a method whereby they could be transmitted from generation to generation without error.)

Not everyone agreed with what was being done. A wandering monk, the leader of a large company, Venerable Purāṇa, while traveling through the Southern Hills south of Rājagaha, came to the cave in the canebrake where the Council was meeting. At this time the Vinaya and Suttas had already been recited (i.e. organized, assigned and rehearsed).

“Friend Purāṇa,” the elders said to him, “the Teaching and Discipline have been recited together by the elder monks. Please submit yourself to this recitation.”

“Friends,” he replied, “the Teaching and Discipline are well-recited by the elders. But in the way I have heard them in the Exalted One’s presence, in the way that I have received them in his presence, thus will I bear it in mind.”—Cullavagga XI.1,11/Vin Ii 288–9.

Thereby Venerable Purāṇa rejected not only the organization of the Suttas into collections but, apparently, the structuring of the Suttas individually into the form in which they had been cast for transmission. The Council had no “legal” status by which it could compel other monks to submit to its decisions nor is the notion of compulsion consistent with the spirit of the Suttas and the Vinaya: its strength lay in the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of its individual members. They could urge, and perhaps generally receive, compliance; but they could not command it. Probably, then, Venerable Purāṇa was not the only teacher who chose to go his own way. Others too, though acknowledging that the Council’s recension was well-recited—i.e., providing right-view guidance—may have preferred to continue teaching according to their own methods. We don’t know for sure for none of those other traditions have survived. The only record we have today of the Buddha’s Teaching is that dependent upon the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of the individuals who comprised the First Council.

Later Additions

“But how do we know,” it may be asked, “that with the closing of the First Council the Sutta recension that they compiled remained intact, without additions? For if no additions were made later then, true enough, we would have here the actual Teaching of the Buddha. But what grounds are there for accepting this as so?”

A good and important question. The answer being, that we *don’t* know that “no additions were made later”: quite the contrary, we *do* know they were made.

The Canon had been open and growing for nearly a half century. For it to be suddenly closed, and for there to be an immediate acceptance of that closure sufficiently widespread for it to be effective, is contrary to reason. Only when the compilation had come to be generally regarded as sacrosanct could the Canon be successfully closed; and such an attitude necessarily develops gradually (witness Ven. Purāṇa). And the evidence of the Suttas themselves supports this view. There are, for example, discourses in which Venerable Ānanda appears not as the Buddha’s shadow but quite apart from the Buddha. In these discourses he is regarded, except by Venerable Mahā Kassapa, as a respected elder; at AN 10:96 (V 198) he is called *mahā-ācariya*, “great teacher” and at SN 16:11 (Ii 218) he is said to have been touring the Southern Hills leading a great company of monks. It is clear that at least some of these discourses took place after his attendancy on the Buddha had ended, with the decease of his master. Indeed, two of them—Subha Sutta, DN 10, and Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta, MN 108—state specifically in their introductory material (DN I 204 and MN Iii 7) that they took place “not long after” the Buddha’s decease. And there are discourses involving monks other than Venerable Ānanda in which the text itself informs us that the conversation took place after the Buddha’s passing away²⁹. Nor can we reasonably suppose all these talks to have occurred during the few months between the Buddha’s decease and the convening of the First Council. Some of them may have, but Madhura (of MN 84), for instance, was in Western India, not so far from present-day Delhi but a great distance

²⁹ E.g. the Madhura Sutta, MN 84/M II 83-90, with Venerable Mahā Kaccāna and King Avantiputta of Madhura; the Ghotamukha Sutta, MN 94/M II 157-63, with Venerable Udena and the brāhmaṇa Ghotamukha.

From Rājagaha, over very bad roads (AN 5:220 (IiI 256)): even if the discourse itself had originated before the Council met, it could hardly have become known in Rājagaha in such a short time, let alone become popular enough for inclusion in the recension. But even if such is maintained, there still remains the Bakkula Sutta, MN 124 (IiI 124–28), in which Venerable Bakkula asserts, at least thirty-three times, that he has been a monk for eighty years.

Now, all accounts agree that the Buddha's decease took place forty-five years after his awakening. Therefore even if Venerable Bakkula had been ordained very soon after the establishment of the Order³⁰, the discourse still had to have taken place at least thirty-five years after the closing of the First Council. And in all likelihood it took place even later than that (although Venerable Bakkula could not have been spoken of by the Buddha unless his ordination took place during the Buddha's lifetime: i.e. the Bakkula Sutta postdates the First Council, but by less than eighty years). We can be quite certain, then, that the First Council did not produce the version of the texts that we now have. But we can be equally certain that the compilation they produced is in no way dramatically different from what we now have. Consider:

If we examine the seven Suttas just referred to, we will notice that they have in common a distinctive feature. Whereas the usual way the discourses begin is: "One time the Exalted One was dwelling at..."³¹ these discourses make no mention of where the Buddha dwelt. Rather, they begin: "One time Venerable Ānanda (or Venerable Udena, or whoever) was dwelling at..." In other words, by this method they inform us at the very start that they are in fact later additions and are not to be taken as having been part of the First Council's compilation³². There is no attempt to disguise the fact. On the contrary, there is a conscientiousness in its assertion.

And when we look through the Nikāyas we find other discourses which follow this same form: "One time Ven. So-and-so was dwelling at..." Although they do not always otherwise declare themselves to be later additions—for once should be enough—yet often we can find further telltale evidence that this is so. Thus for example in the Dīgha Nikāya aside from the already-mentioned Subha Sutta, there is only one other discourse out of the thirty-four in that collection wherein we are told the dwelling not of the Buddha but of the main individual, Venerable Kumara Kassapa, in this case. This discourse—the Pāyāsi Sutta, DN 23/D Ii 316–58—involves a long discussion between Venerable Kassapa and the chieftain Pāyāsi, mainly on the subject of rebirth. The chieftain presents a series of thought-out reasonings as evidence that there is no rebirth. Venerable Kassapa presents counter-arguments, primarily in the form of elaborate similes³³, showing the flaws in Pāyāsi's theses. In the end, although Venerable Kassapa does not actually *offer* any arguments in favor of rebirth, Pāyāsi declares himself to be both convinced and pleased.

Now, on numerous occasions the Buddha declared that for beings constrained by craving there is rebirth (SN 22:25/M IiI 26) etc). He said that he could remember his own past lives (MN 4/M I 22)

³⁰ This, however, is unlikely. Venerable Bakkula seems to be mentioned, in the whole of the four Nikāyas, in only one other context: in AN 1:14/A I 25) he is declared by the Buddha to be foremost among all monks in respect of good health.

³¹ Because the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas contain numerous short discourses, therein this formula is often abbreviated or omitted entirely. This almost certainly was done by the later scribes rather than the earlier reciters. In these instances we know that the Buddha is the speaker by his use of the term *bhikkhave*, the vocative form for "monks"; for in those days all monks addressed one another as *āvuso* (= "reverend" or "sir"); only the Buddha used the term *bhikkhave*.

³² This is in distinction to those Suttas, presumably *not* later additions, in which although the Buddha plays no part whatsoever in the narrative, yet his dwelling place at that time is nevertheless given according to the usual formula. Examples will be found at DN 34; MN 5, 9, 28, 69, 76, 127; SN 5:1, 6:3, 6, 9; AN 6:34, etc. A comparison of SN 55:52/S V 405-6 and SN 56:30/S V 436-7 points up the distinction. In neither case does the Buddha appear "on stage"; in both cases he is quoted; the first discourse begins "One time the Buddha was dwelling at..."; the second begins "One time a number of senior monks were dwelling at..."

³³ Like Venerable Bakkula, Venerable Kumāra Kassapa is mentioned elsewhere in the four Nikāyas only at AN 1:14/A I 24, where he is declared foremost in respect of embellished speech. Had the Pāyāsi Sutta not been appended to the Canon, we would have had no example of this. He is also mentioned once in the Vinaya. In affirming the validity of his admission to the Order, for which one must be at least twenty years of age, the Buddha stated that age is reckonable not from birth but from conception, declaring that it is in the womb that "the mind (*citta*) first arises, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) first becomes manifest."—Mahāvagga 1.75/Vin I 92.

etc), that he could see the passing on of beings according to their deeds (MN 4/M I 22–3) etc), and that by means of certain mental practices others could develop these abilities (AN 10:102; A V 211) etc), and had done so: e.g. the Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Anuruddha. But nowhere do the Suttas record the Buddha arguing in favor of rebirth on *logical* grounds; nor would we expect him to do so for rebirth is not a matter of logic. Yet despite Venerable Kassapa’s assertion that until then he had neither seen nor heard of anyone sharing Pāyāsi’s views, there must have been many skeptics to judge both from the views ascribed by the texts to the various teachers of the day and from the frequency with which the Suttas assert rebirth; and most monks—even among those who had personally achieved complete self-purification—would have had to accept rebirth on the basis of confidence in the Buddha rather than from direct knowledge (see SN 12:70/S Ii 122–3), and compare AN 7:54/A IV 78–82)). After the Buddha’s decease, then, there was a strongly felt need for some sort of textual authority to lend support to these monks on the question of rebirth, just as the Madhura Sutta, mentioned earlier, seems to have been included to lend support to the Buddhist teaching of ethical equality between castes. It matters not at all that Venerable Kassapa’s similes are unlikely to convince a modern skeptic: they were appropriate to their time; they filled an existing need. And that need would have been felt most strongly among the reciters and preservers of the long discourses.

The Pāyāsi Sutta (which is obviously the model for the much later Milindapañhā) could have been made much shorter—and hence included in any of the other Nikāyas—by eliminating extraneous introductory and concluding material and some of the more elaborate similes; so it was not only due to considerations of length that it came to be included in the Dīgha Nikāya³⁴. Rather, questions about rebirth are more apt to be raised by the laity (whose goal is to obtain a good rebirth) than by monks (whose aim is to transcend rebirth entirely), and in fact the arguments of the Pāyāsi Sutta, concerned as they are with reasoning and simile, are more likely to convince a layperson than a practicing monk who—questions of relevance aside—might be better convinced by evidence concerned with direct reflexion and perception. Of the four Nikāyas the Dīgha is, for reasons we have already noted, the one most directed to the interests of laypeople (thus lending substantiation to the Commentarial suggestion that Venerable Ānanda was primarily responsible for this collection). Hence the monks who would most likely seek textual support on the question of rebirth would be the *Dīghabhāṇakas*, the “reciters of the Dīgha.” There would have developed among the individuals of the various companies who shared the responsibility for various portions of the long discourses a consensus that the Pāyāsi Sutta, until then a part of the peripheral material known by those reciters but not included in their texts, should be formally included in the Nikāya. Since the Dīgha is divided into three *vaggas*, or sections (each about a volume in length), and since the Pāyāsi Sutta, is now the last discourse of the second *vagga*, the responsibility apparently was assigned to or taken up by those who recited the middle portion of the long discourses. (However, it was not always the case that later Suttas came to be placed at the end of a *vagga*, as the evidence shows.)

The discourse makes no claim to being the *ipsissima verba* of the Buddha. It presents itself as being, in its central portion, a conversation between a certain fairly obscure monk and a certain layman, apparently mentioned nowhere else in the Suttas; there is no reason not to accept it on those terms. It acknowledges itself to be a later addition (as the Commentator Dhammapāla points out at Vimānavatthu Commentary, p. 297: indeed, every discourse identified by the traditional commentaries as post-First Council begins, it seems, with the “One time Venerable So-and-so” formula). But it was not a haphazard addition: the mechanism by which the Suttas were passed on necessitated, before the Canon was closed, that additional material could be inserted only when there was a common accord among those who were responsible for a portion of the texts.

Turning now to the Majjhima Nikāya we learn more about the process of adding discourses. Other than those already mentioned there are two discourses in the Majjhima that make no mention of the Buddha’s dwelling place: the Anumāna Sutta, MN 15 (I 95–100) and the Māratajjaniya Sutta, MN 50 (I 332–8). Both begin: “One time Venerable Mahā Moggallāna dwelt in Bhagga Country...” Since we know from SN 47:14 (V 163–5) that both Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna predeceased the Buddha, the discourses themselves could not have taken place after the time of the First Council, as was

³⁴ Nor is length an absolute criterion. There are at least fifteen Suttas in the other three Nikāyas that are longer than the shortest of the Dīgha Suttas.

evidently the case with the Pāyāsi Sutta; rather they were simply not included in that compilation³⁵. But we note that the two Majjhima Suttas have the same venue, and that the Bhagga Country was an out-of-the-way place, at least as measured by the infrequency of its mention in the Suttas³⁶. Since Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Venerable Sāriputta were the two chief disciples of the Buddha, the monks living among the Bhaggas would certainly have remembered the former's visit to them and would have kept in mind what he had said and done, as part of their local tradition.

There must have been in residence there some companies of *majjhimabhāṇakas*, preserving at least the first third of the Majjhima Nikāya (which today contains 152 Suttas and, like the Dīgha, is divided into three volume-length *vaggas*). They would be the ones to have wished to include these two discourses—all the more precious for having taken place *here*—in their collection, to raise them from the lower status of local tradition and to afford them additional protection against being lost. When meeting with neighboring *majjhimabhāṇakas* (as they must have done from time to time, not only to recite together) they successfully convinced their fellow-monks to include these two discourses in their own recitations. Thus, due in effect to local boosterism, the Canon grew. And when we look at the Saṃyutta Nikāya we find further evidence of this.

In the entire Vana Saṃyutta (SN 9/S I 197–205) we find no mention of the Buddha. And all but one of these fourteen discourses take place in Kosala. The monks living in the woods (*vana*) of Kosala apparently managed to get their own local tradition, much involved with deities, included in the Canon. So apparently did the followers of Venerable Sāriputta, for although elsewhere in the Nikāyas he is found frequently in discussion with the Buddha, in the Sāriputta Saṃyutta (SN 28; S Ii 235–40)) none of the ten discourses make mention of the Teacher; nine of them take place in Sāvattī. Similarly the four consecutive Saṃyuttas (38–41) named after, respectively, the wanderers Jambukhādaka and Sāmaṇḍaka (each containing sixteen conversations with Venerable Sāriputta, the first set entirely in Magadha, the second among the Vajjians), Venerable Mahā Moggallāna (eleven discourses, all set in Sāvattī), and the lay disciple Citta (ten discourses, all set at Macchikāsaṇḍa) are apparently later additions to the Saṃyutta Nikāya of discourses already in existence when the First Council met, but not compiled by them. (The Suttas concerned with Citta clearly reveal attitudes of lay devotees rather than of monks.)

And there are further examples in both the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas; but we need not investigate them, for we can see by now that the method whereby any new material could be inserted into the collections had to involve a consensus as to its suitability and also to include in each case a “warning label”—“Venerable So-and-so was dwelling at...”—that the discourse is not part of the original compilation. There are about 200 such discourses, filling roughly 350 pages of print, which is about six per cent of the total.

And by the same evidence we can know that neither was any material lost nor were any of the Suttas arbitrarily altered. For exactly the same mechanism that required consensus in order to add to the Canon would have come into force had any attempt been made to alter a text. And we can well imagine the difficulty, the virtual impossibility from the very outset, of such a consensus being achieved in order to alter what had been laid down by those very monks who were venerated as the founders of the various lineages (see SN 14:15/S Ii 155–7).

³⁵ There are a number of other discourses which also begin “One time Ven. So-and-so...” but which similarly must have been delivered during the Buddha's lifetime. For example there are about seventy-five such Suttas involving either or both Ven. Mahā Moggallāna or Ven. Sāriputta. There are also two Suttas (SN 41:9/S IV 300–302 and AN 2:36/A I 65–7) wherein it is specifically stated in the dialogue that the Buddha was then living (at Sāvattī, in the latter instance, but in the former the location is not given). Therefore we cannot assert that all “One time Ven. So-and-so...” discourses were delivered after the Buddha's decease: only that they came to be included in the Canon at a later date.

³⁶ A number of other “One time Ven. So-and-so...” discourses are also set in remote locales: Āḷavi, Avanti, Cetī, Madhura, etc., generally West of the centres where the texts locate; Venerable Ānanda: Vesāli, Pāṭaliputta, Rājagaha, Kosambi. Although during the Buddha's day the West of India was still “pioneer country” as regards the Teaching, we know (as discussed in the Appendix) that within a century of the First Council these western territories had risen to monastic prominence (and, perhaps, cultural importance as well: Taxila was already a centre of learning even in the Buddha's day: Mahāvagga 8.1.6–7/Vin I 269–70).

In order for any Sutta or part of a Sutta to have been lost, we should have to suppose either a collective amnesia among all the monks of all the companies who were reciters of that Sutta—hundreds, or more probably thousands of ambulatory amnesiacs!—or else the breaking up and disappearance of every single company responsible for a certain portion of the Suttas—and this in a time when all the evidence indicates that the Order was thriving and growing—together with the refusal or inability of any single monk (or ex-monk) from any of those lost companies to come forward to teach the texts to the surviving groups. A most improbable combination of events! No, the evidence shows clearly that there were additions to the texts, but to suppose either substantial changes or losses is contrary to reason.

It must be emphasized (primarily for the benefit of scholarly readers) that we did not begin by assuming that Suttas which do not refer to the Buddha in their introductory material are therefore later additions to the Canon. Rather, we first discovered a few Suttas that certainly describe events that had taken place after the Buddha's decease. Examining them, we noticed that they possessed one feature in common and in distinction to the great majority of discourses. We then looked at other texts which also displayed this feature and found therein further grounds to accept that those texts, too, were probably later additions to the Canon. We described in detail the evidence found in several of these texts and indicated in brief other Suttas providing additional evidence; but we do not propose to present the data to be found in a number of other texts, for to do so would require a very long and technical and uninteresting digression. We will note only that this evidence consists of a large number of small, and a few not-so-small, points, all tending in the same direction, with no cases of an opposite tendency³⁷.

For how long did this process of slow accretion continue? We can be quite certain that by the time of the Second Council, which met a century after the Buddha's decease, the process had already ended, the four Nikāyas being regarded as closed, and that this view was ratified and finalized by that Council. The evidence:

All additional Suttas involve "first generation" monks, i.e. contemporaries of the Buddha but who, in some cases, outlived the Teacher³⁸. The only instance which can reasonably be considered an exception is that of Venerable Nārada, whose talk with King Muṇḍa—Ajātasattu's great-grandson, according to later accounts—is recorded at AN 5:50/A Iii 57–62. However, even in this case we have a discourse at SN 12:68/S Ii 115–8—clearly earlier than the Aṅguttara Sutta, for there he is said to be already a worthy one (*arahat*), i.e. fully liberated, whereas here he is self-described as not yet *arahat*, still a *sekha*—where Venerable Ānanda also has a part. So if Venerable Nārada was not contemporaneous with the Buddha, he was at least not far from it. At any rate, Venerable Nārada's discourse to King Muṇḍa is, as we have it, identical to a discourse to the monks spoken by the Buddha: AN 5:48/A Iii 54–56.

Later sources tell us that it was during the time of Kālasoka, the third Magadhese king after Munda, that the Second Council convened. The Vinaya's description of this Council is much more detailed than, and about twice the length of, its report on the First Council. The impetus for the

³⁷ Since this evidence—"One time Venerable so-and-so dwelt at..."—once noted seems obvious, it may be wondered why it has been unreported until now. That the Commentaries should not remark upon it is not remarkable, not only because they lacked in the Fifth Century A.D. the scholarly apparatus available today—word- and name-dictionaries, concordances, indexes, etc. and of course printed editions of the texts, annotated and convenient to use—but also because India has been historically unhistorical-minded (see footnote 15): a concern with dates has traditionally been regarded as secondary to the act of placing one's faith in a teaching. Historical questions are a particularly Western concern. As to why, therefore, modern scholars have failed to note this evidence, it may be kindest to allow each reader to form his own judgment.

³⁸ A half dozen or so of these later discourses speak only of "a certain (unnamed) monk," or "a group of monks." Naturally in these cases we cannot know definitely that the monks were contemporaries of the Buddha. However, there is no reason to suppose otherwise: we find other texts wherein unnamed monks converse with the Buddha. There are another half-dozen or so Suttas involving monks who are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon and whose generation therefore cannot be established except by reference to post-Canonical works. Again, this is a feature found in some Suttas that are not later additions. At any rate, we would expect that were there any Suttas involving second generation monks, at least some of those monks would have been well-known leaders of companies, not the obscure or unnamed. No discourses involving nuns, it seems, are later additions.

meeting was the exposure and condemnation of certain relaxations of monastic discipline which had arisen among a company of monks centered in Vesāli (the famous “ten points,” the most important of which concerned a relaxation of the prohibition against “accepting, using, or consenting to the deposit of money”). We are told of the politicking that went on before the Council met, and we are introduced to the main players in that drama, the leading monks of the day. Not one of these eight monks nor any of the lesser monks mentioned is known to the four Nikāyas. If the four Nikāyas had been then regarded as open to additional material, surely we would expect to find these monks represented³⁹.

What happened is clear: however highly these monks might have been regarded individually, (for, of course, some of them would have achieved full purification) those monks who were not contemporaries of the Buddha could never achieve the distinction of those who had known him personally. Later monks belonged, inevitably, to a particular lineage which (like caste) could not be transcended. Only the founding elders, those who had established the lineages, could be regarded as beyond those lines. If the doings and sayings of these second generation monks were admitted to the Nikāyas, where would it end? The decision that needed to be reached if the Nikāyas were to survive at all was that with the passing of the first generation the collections *had* to be closed. Had they been left open they would have become amorphous and protean—not to be confused with “rich and varied”—and would have lost their very purpose. Therefore whatever pressures may have developed to incorporate this or that “second generation” discourse needed to be opposed and obviously were.

³⁹ One of these monks, Venerable Sabbakāmi, has some verses (453-58) in the Theragāthā of the Khuddaka Nikāya (see below)—appropriately enough, on the subject of sensuality (kāma). He is specifically identified in the report of the Second Council as being the oldest monk in the world, 120 years of age, and as having been a pupil of Venerable Ānanda.

Westerners sometimes express surprise, or more than surprise, at the number of monks reported to have lived to extreme old age. However, it is recognized that the qualities that are co-adjuncts of mental calmness (lack of bodily stress, etc.) contribute to longevity; and since it is the business of monks to cultivate calmness (though not for the sake of long life), it is to be expected that monks would outlive the general populace. The Suttas tell us—Dhp 109, etc.—that longevity is also linked to respect for one's elders. However, since this would not seem to be statistically quantifiable it is unlikely that Western medical science will ever be in a position either to confirm or disprove this thesis.

The Fifth Nikāya

The material which was admitted to the Four Nikāyas during the first century after the Buddha was but a fraction of what was remembered. Much of this material, which included a great deal of verse⁴⁰, must have been in common circulation, the preserve of no single lineage or group of companies; for within the four Nikāyas and also within the Vinaya we find not only one Sutta referring to another⁴¹ but also, here and there, Suttas referring to material which lies outside the first four Nikāyas⁴². There was also new material being generated to fulfill new needs (as with the Pāyāsi Sutta on rebirth), or to describe new events (as with Ven. Nārada's talk to King Muṇḍa). What was to be done with all of this? To add substantially to the Nikāyas would have established an unfortunate precedent leading to the inevitable dissipation of their integrity; yet to leave the material disorganized would be to abandon much that was worthy to an early destruction. The solution chosen was the creation of the fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Khuddaka means "small" and at first the Khuddaka Nikāya was indeed small. Today, with fifteen separate sections, it is the most voluminous of the Nikāyas, but originally it consisted of probably six or seven separate short texts, each of which had been compiled and preserved, prior to inclusion in the Nikāya, individually on its own merits.

The Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, for instance, consist of the verses of various monks and nuns, respectively. Here there can be no doubt that some of the verses are by second generation disciples (e.g. Venerable Pārāpariya's verses, 920–948), and that the texts grew substantially after the First Council. This is only to be expected: the two collections do not pretend otherwise. The Dhammapada is a collection of popular verses. Quite a few are to be found elsewhere among the Suttas, but as many or more are unique to this compilation. Most of the verses stand alone, unconnected to the others. We have no direct evidence as to the date of its closure, but the arrangement and distribution of the verses suggest that it could well have grown during the first century. The Sutta Nipāta is, like the Dhammapada, a collection of popular verse, but it differs in that its verses form longer poems, each of which is regarded as a discourse. Indeed, some of them have prose attached, as a sort of introductory bunting. A few of the poems appear within the four Nikāyas; the remainder are the most popular of those longer poems that are not included therein. As such, a number of its passages are quoted within the four Nikāyas (as noted above), which has given rise to the mistaken view that the Sutta Nipāta contains the "oldest layer" of texts. Certainly, some of the Sutta Nipāta texts are contemporaneous with the first four Nikāyas; but they do not pre-date them⁴³.

The Udāna is a collection of eighty solemn utterances spoken by the Buddha on special occasions. The Itivuttaka contains 112 short Suttas, each accompanied by verses, the relevance of which is not always apparent. This fact together with some seeming textual corruptions suggest that it may have

⁴⁰ Surprise is sometimes expressed at the quantity of verse in the five Nikāyas. But verse not only has obvious mnemonic value whereby the compilers would give it priority over prose passages; less obviously but more importantly it has great inspirational value. It is sometimes suggested that not only was verse if ever seldom spoken spontaneously as the texts often report, but also that much of it "must have been" created in a later—i.e., more literate—time. Such is the prejudice of a prosaic era; but a more poetic age—Elizabethan England, for example—would not have shared this misconception.

⁴¹ Although we are unable to cite an example of such a referring Sutta which does not seem to be a later addition, at least one such text—SN 46:3/S IV 286-7—was evidently not a later creation, but was spoken during the Buddha's lifetime.

⁴² As at, e.g., Mahāvagga 5.13.9/Vin I 195-6 = Ud 5.6/59, at SN 12:31/S II 47-50, at AN 3:32/A I 133-4, etc. The above examples all refer to or quote from passages found today in the Sutta Nipāta of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

⁴³ This notion of older and younger layers of text assumes, contrary to the evidence, that the first four Nikāyas grew over a period of centuries by a process of heterogeneous accretion until they reached their present form. As such, it is part of the syncretistic approach which we have already rejected. Certainly some discourses are older than others inasmuch as they did not all appear simultaneously on one sunny afternoon. Other than the few exceptions already discussed, it took about forty-five years for them to evolve; and it should be no great surprise that various individuals, including the Buddha, might, on occasion, refer to or even quote from what had already been said.

had a longer independent life before being incorporated into the Khuddaka Nikāya. If this is so, it indicates what happened to those texts that did not receive the formal protection of organization.

“The Jātaka contains only the verses connected with the 547 tales of previous existences of the Buddha. The [prose] tales are in a commentary of the fifth century A.D., which claims to be translated from Sinhalese [to Pāli].... Professor T. W. Rhys Davids has stated that these tales are ‘old stories, fairy tales, and fables, the most important collection of ancient folklore extant,’ which we are not able to deny.”⁴⁴

Since the Jātaka verses are often incomprehensible without the prose commentary, it is difficult to see how they could predate the prose. The prose, however, would predate the fifth century commentary into which it was translated and collected. The origin of these verses, then, remains indeterminate. It is sometimes thought that since these three texts—Udāna, Itivuttaka, Jātaka—are mentioned as part of the ninefold description of texts (see above) that they must be, like the Sutta Nipāta, part of “the oldest layer” of texts that we now have; but it is more reasonable to suggest that they were so named because the ninefold description was already in existence.

The other eight texts that are today included within the Khuddaka Nikāya are generally regarded as late additions, and need not be discussed.

The formation of this collection probably arose during the century between the two Councils rather than with the Second Council itself: such developments need time to generate strength and achieve general acceptance. By the time the Council assembled, the force of opinion would have already been in favor of including this new collection in the Canon: the Council’s function herein would have been to ratify and reinforce this consensus and, no doubt, to decide upon its organizational details. They would also have had a hand in deciding final organizational details for the other Nikāyas and for the Vinaya. It was possibly at this time, for example, that DN 16—see Preface, paragraph six—was expanded to its present form (or at least a previous expansion was at this time ratified) by including passages taken from the other parts of the Nikāyas. And, too, those few texts, the “six percent” which had been added to their collections by the various bhāṅakas, would have been cast now into their final forms⁴⁵.

It needed to be done, for the monks of the Vesāli company, along with their supporters, seem (according to a non-Canonical text, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, vv. 32ff.) to have refused to accept the ruling of the Council, breaking away and forming their own council, wherein they re-arranged and, it seems, added to the texts to suit their own purposes. During the next 250 years this company split up and resplintered into numerous factions, each having evolved its own set of doctrines and disciplinary codes⁴⁶. None of these texts have survived: again, as with Venerable Purāṇa, we learn the survival-

⁴⁴ Venerable Aggamahāpaṇḍita A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, on p. 260 of his collection of monographs, *Corrections of Geiger’s Mahāvamsa Etc.* (Ambalangoda, Ceylon, 1957).

⁴⁵ That the Twelfth Khandhaka account of this Council makes no mention whatsoever of a recitation of the Suttas, nor any decisions as to the fifth Nikāya, nor the placement of later additions within the four Nikāyas, does not mean that they were not done then. First, the report as given omits a number of other important details as well, such as the refusal of the Vesāli company to accept the Council’s decisions and to abandon their practices. Second, it would be expected by all monks as a matter of course that whenever a body of monks met, they would review their texts in order to prevent (or discover) variances. Third, the purpose of the account was to condemn the Vesāli monks. The full list of ten points is censured, item by item, three times in the space of fifteen pages and denounced as a whole many times more. To have reported on other matters would have diluted the force of the anathematization. Finally, in the Bakkula Sutta (discussed above) a phrase is inserted —“inasmuch as for eighty years Venerable Bakkula has...”—after each statement of Venerable Bakkula’s achievements. This phrase (according to the Commentary: M-a IV 193) was inserted by the elders who made the recension of the Teaching. We are not told which elders, but from our own examination we can see clearly that it would have had to have been the elders of this Second Council.

⁴⁶ Some scholars might question the identification of the Vesāli company with the progenitors of the splinter groups or suggest, more modestly, that only some of these sects evolved from the Vesāli monks, the remainder breaking away from the Councils’ lineage at later dates. These are scholarly issues, which it would be out of place to discuss here. Perhaps the fullest discussion, together with informative charts, is to be found in the Prefatory Notes to the Aung/Rhys Davids translation of the Kathāvatthu (*Points of Controversy*, Pāli Text Society, London, 1915).

value of organization⁴⁷. The fact that the Suttas and Vinaya⁴⁸ have survived as coherent entities can now be seen to be itself strong evidence that they have survived unchanged.

Conclusions

With the closing of the Second Council we have no further Canonical information regarding the history of the Suttas. Gleanings from later texts inform us that a Third Council was held in the time of King Asoka, at which meeting the rift which had opened up more than a century earlier, with the Second Council, now widened and variant forms of doctrine began to emerge which eventually formed what is now known as Mahāyāna. The four Nikāyas were left unchanged while the Khuddaka Nikāya was cast essentially into the form in which we now have it. (A few of the very late additions to this collection—notably the Buddhavaṃsa—appear to have undergone slight further editing, perhaps at the Fourth Council. On this, see Adikaram’s lucid, though technical, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Gunasena, Colombo, 1946, p. 35.). Also, missions were sent to many countries and the Teaching was successfully transplanted in all directions. Of particular note, the Order was established in Ceylon from whence came many of the later reports and which became the center for study, preservation and practice of the Pāli Suttas for many centuries.

About 450 years after the Buddha a famine struck Ceylon. For twelve years food was so scarce that the Order of monks was almost decimated partly, we are told, due to some of the laity turning to cannibalism. Some of the Suttas were in danger of being lost. Monks who were too weak to stand rehearsed the texts where they lay. When at last the famine ended, it was realized that the texts needed to be put into writing for their greater protection⁴⁹. Not only the famine but—according to Adikaram (op. cit., p. 79)—the danger of frequent invasions from South India, the entry into the Order of irresponsible and irreligious people (on which point see *Mahāvāṃsa* 33.101), and the fickle favor of kings also played a part in this decision. Accordingly, a Fourth Council was convened, wherein this was accomplished.

In the centuries after this Council the texts continued to be preserved as much by recital as by manuscript, for making even one handwritten copy of the five Nikāyas, of the Vinaya, and of all the material that had evolved and survived alongside them, the Abhidhamma, the Commentaries, the Chronicles, and so forth, would have been a labor of many years and then the manuscript had to be preserved against the manifold dangers of destruction. But by this time the Suttas were firmly embedded in the minds of those who learned them as being sacred and unalterable by as much as a single syllable.

The dangers we have seen to be inherent in an open Canon were long since past. It was no longer possible for additional material to be added to the texts. There still remained the dangers of accidental alteration (copyists’ errors, etc: see previous footnote) and of loss due to the disappearance of companies and sometimes the decline of the Order. We need not discuss these in any detail. We know what variations exist in manuscripts that were separated from each other by thousands of miles and hundreds of years, and we are confident that these differences are not significant. Although we

⁴⁷ Though these texts have not survived as collections, yet scattered fragments have been rediscovered in Sanskrit, and more coherent units have been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

⁴⁸ The evolution of the Vinaya is parallel to that of the Suttas. A description of its evolution would be more complex, partly due to the need to consider what is nowadays known as the “old commentary”; but it would follow the same lines of reasoning used herein; and it would arrive at the same conclusions: like the four Nikāyas, the Vinaya achieved essentially its final form during the first century following the Buddha. The question of when the “old commentary” came to be embedded in the text, and of how the Parivāra became semi-attached to the Vinaya proper need not concern us. For a short note on this subject, see the Appendix.

⁴⁹ Although writing had been known in India for perhaps two centuries before the time of the Buddha, apparently the technology of paper and ink was as yet undeveloped. Messages, letters and the like might have been scratched onto the smooth underside of bark, then rubbed with black oil to “ink” the writing, but no way had then been found to preserve for long what was thus marked. No clay tablets have been found from this era, although two brick inscriptions of a Sanskrit Sūtra, dating some centuries after the Buddha, have been found at Nālandā: *Epigraphia Indica* XXI, pp. 177-99.

cannot assert definitely that no material was lost, at most only a small amount could have disappeared without our knowing of it through the various records that were made relating to the texts, some of which, such as the Asokan edicts were engraved in stone. We can accept that the texts survived, at least for the most part, and with no more than insignificant changes, to the present, weathering various worldly vicissitudes which we need not trace; for we have now explored the origin of the Suttas and discovered how it is that these Suttas which we have today can be reliably regarded as being the actual Teaching of Gotama Buddha.

Well before the time of the famine in Ceylon it had been discovered that when young ola leaves, scraped and boiled, were marked with treated carbon black, the writing produced could be legibly preserved for many years. Only then did recording become worth the effort involved. The results, however, are not entirely in favor of the written record. The critical editions of the texts strongly suggest that almost all the variant readings that are noted therein are the result of copyists' errors. Very rarely do these variant readings make a difference in meaning; usually it is a matter of a word being added or dropped, or differences as regards abridgement, spelling, and the like.

Choosing a Standard

In spite of all this there are still those who will insist that the four Nikāyas as we have them contain material that, though in the guise of earlier texts, are, in fact, later additions⁵⁰. Though few, perhaps, will go so far as to charge the monks with unscrupulous mendacity⁵¹, some will nevertheless reject many texts as "not original Buddhism." Their reason for doing so is, almost always, a personal disagreement with the descriptions or instructions found therein. They will often conceal this fact with phrases like "historical doubts", but in the end it comes down to their unwillingness to believe that a Fully Awakened One could possibly teach anything that they themselves did not agree with.

We do not entertain such notions, for we have not forgotten that we started out by acknowledging our need for guidance, and we do not presume to know as well as (or even better than) our guide (See Ud 8.7/90-1). But even so it must be admitted that anyone, and particularly Westerners, coming fresh to this Teaching will almost certainly discover discourses containing material that sounds, to their contemporary ears, a bit, well ... *improbable*. This is a real problem for many newcomers; for it is likely that they will encounter approaches and attitudes which are unfamiliar. Until one has mastered the unsurpassable art of acquiescence (*khanti*), without which learning is impossible, there will naturally be resistance to what demands of us that we surrender those notions and conceits which we hold most dear. This is the difficult part of the Teaching, and to pretend otherwise would be to do a disservice to both the Teaching and the inquirer. And among the first resistances to arise nowadays will be those involving differences in world views. Since the Teaching comes to us embedded within a cultural context that is in some ways alien to the viewpoint with which we are on comfortable and familiar terms, it is natural that we congratulate ourselves for being so much more advanced. It can be profoundly difficult to recognize that the truths offered by our own culture are neither eternal nor absolute, and need not be valued any more highly than other viewpoints.

⁵⁰ Early and later Sanskrit Sutras of Mahāyāna as well as Tibetan scriptures and other late traditions are full of this. Those who wish to defend these traditions have been known to assume quite gratuitously that since these other traditions are manifestly full of invented material that the Pāli Suttas must be also. But if the preceding account is largely correct, then this view must be erroneous. If such a view is nevertheless insisted upon, then its proponents would need to offer a description of the evolution of the Pāli Suttas demonstrating a reasonable and human sequence alternative to the one offered herein. Such an account would have to be in accord not only with reason but with the known facts. Even if such an account were made, it could be at best an alternative interpretation, in no way devaluing what has been presented here; but to our knowledge such a description has never even been offered.

⁵¹ To such a distasteful charge there can (and should) be no reply (see AN 4:42/A II 46), for it is a product of the same attitude which seeks to understand the world in terms of conspiracies. If dishonesty is *assumed* then "evidence" will *inevitably* be "discovered" to confirm the assumption. The only way to resolve such a dilemma is to explore carefully the need to make the assumption in the first place.

An analogy: Suppose it was said that there exist in this very world invisible beings—countless millions of them—which have the power to affect our welfare. Some of them are helpful, but others, unfortunately, cause only trouble and illness. However, there are certain people who wear special costumes and who possess special and powerful means whereby they can actually see these invisible beings. Moreover, they have devised special powders and potions by means of which they can counteract the baneful influence of the harmful beings. True or false? Most Westerners have derided this notion, sometimes vehemently, with snorts and sighs aplenty. But suppose now it were added that these invisible beings are called “germs” and “viruses” and that they have been investigated by white-coated laboratory scientists who possess electron microscopes, and who have discovered antibiotics and other drugs.

“Oh, but that’s *different!*” many will reply; and indeed it is. But what exactly is the difference? Language, certainly; but beyond that there is also a difference in the conceptual imagery used to account for the experience of illness. The imagery and vocabulary that are familiar are accepted while what is strange is rejected.

We do not wish to suggest by this analogy that the *only* difficulties in understanding the Buddha’s Teaching are linguistic or cultural: there is, beyond them, the personal difficulty, the difficulty which started us on our quest. We need to assert, cherish, and develop the view that the real difficulty is our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit which are themselves the condition for our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit...⁵² But before ever coming to *that* difficulty a newcomer may find himself faced with thorny doubts, and he may not see the source of the thorns. He may assert that it rains due to appropriate meteorological conditions, and scoff at the Suttas’ suggestion that it rains because the rain gods are active (AN 5:197/A Iil 243)). After all, who has ever seen a rain god? But who has ever seen a meteorological condition?

The difficulty may be illustrated by an example from the author’s own experience. When I first began to inquire seriously into the Buddha’s Teaching, I found—in addition to much that impressed me most favorably—a discourse whose topic was “the thirty-two marks of a great man” and whose point (as I took it) was that these marks were *physical* and that the Buddha had such marks, *ergo* he was a great man. Coming from a rationalistic tradition, I was unable to accept this. It smacked of deification or worse, and seemed totally incompatible with the spirit of investigation that pervaded those Suttas that had most impressed me. Besides, some of these marks—projecting heels, ankles midway in the legs, legs like an antelope’s, no hollow between the shoulders, white hair growing between the eyes, head shaped like a turban, etc.—seemed quite simply freakish. I asked several of the other young Western monks, who confessed that they, too, could not accept this discourse. “Here,” I then decided, “is an obvious case of a later addition: this Sutta had to be invented by those who had never seen the Buddha.”

This view was confirmed when I noticed, in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* that when King Ajātasattu visited the Buddha for the first (and only recorded) time, as he approached the pavilion where the company of monks sat, he asked his physician which one of the monks was the Buddha (I 50), and he was told that the Buddha was the one sitting against the middle pillar. “Had the Buddha really been endowed with those peculiar, alien, and odious marks,” I reasoned, “the king would not have had to ask such a question. But even if he did ask, then the obvious answer to be given would have been that the Buddha was ‘that funny-looking fellow in the middle.’”⁵³ And then I read the *Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta*, MN 140, wherein it is told how the Buddha, traveling alone, put up one night side by side with a monk who told him that he (the monk) was on his way to meet the Buddha for the first time. Only after hearing a teaching did this monk realize, from the profundity of the discourse, that his companion had to be the Buddha himself. “*Surely,*” I decided, “if the Buddha

⁵² “Ignorance, monk, is the one thing with a monk’s elimination of which ignorance is eliminated and gnosis arises.”—SN 35:79/S IV 50

⁵³ According to the commentarial tradition of the Abhayagiri Vihāra, Ajātasattu was only a child when he had last seen the Buddha and could not recognize him after the intervening lapse of time. The Mahāvihāra tradition maintained that the Buddha, who emanated six-fold rays and possessed a body marked with special characteristics, could not be mistaken for anyone else and that Ajātasattu was merely pretending not to recognize him. It is thus evident that, unlike the Abhayagirivāsins, the commentators of the Mahāvihāra insisted on the superhuman characteristics of the Buddha. See p. 26 of *Robe and Plough*, by R.A. Gunawardana, Tucson, 1979.

had been endowed with those absurd marks, this monk would have known at once who his companion was.”

And so I set aside that discourse on the thirty-two marks, and all was well, until ... I discovered *another* Sutta on the same subject, and then *another*, and *another*, and finally I realized (with some dismay) that the subject was dealt with, sometimes more than once, in every Nikāya except the Saṃyutta. Had it appeared only once, or maybe twice, I could have set it aside as an oddity and forgotten about it; but here it was popping up all over the place! My appreciation of the other discourses had been growing as their methodology became gradually more familiar and comfortable; but now my confidence in the authenticity of the collection as a whole was shaken. What was I to do?

“Leave it alone,” I was advised. “Use the Suttas for what they’re for: right-view guidance. There’s no Sutta that teaches the existence of a permanent condition, or of a pleasurable condition, or of anything that can be taken as self. Don’t reject what’s precious just because you think you see a few wrinkles in it.” And so for many years I did my best to ignore those “thirty-two marks” discourses and tried to make use of what was manifestly valuable.

During those years I came to a growing understanding of the importance of putting trust in one’s teacher (see note 5b) and a growing conviction that “they who have faith in the Buddha have faith in the highest: they who have faith in the highest have the highest results.”—AN 4:34/A li 34) The Buddha knew that those who, trusting his advice, lived in accordance with it would do themselves the most good and therefore, with no conceit whatsoever, out of compassion for others, he did and said that which would achieve this end.

Everyone can and does change his appearance to some extent, as the situation requires. For example, when called in by the boss for a tongue-lashing, one may quite literally make oneself smaller by hunching the shoulders, etc., perhaps without even being aware of it; but when showing off before friends one may “walk tall.” Anyone who has practiced meditation even to a modest extent is likely to come to an appreciation of the enormous powers that are available to one proficient in advanced levels of meditation. It becomes an easy matter to accept that the Buddha (or for that matter anyone meditatively advanced, even one who has not achieved enlightenment—Devadatta, for example), could alter his appearance to a far greater extent than most people, even to the extent of appearing with all thirty-two marks.

These marks, each of those discourses tells us, belong to the lore of the brāhmaṇa caste. The Suttas, it seems, never assert the *correctness* of this lore; nor do they digress into a refutation of it. In each case a brāhmaṇa came to the Buddha intent upon judging the Buddha’s worth as a teacher by whether he had these marks⁵⁴. Knowing that appearances don’t matter but that rightly-placed confidence is of great value, the Buddha, it would seem, let those brāhmaṇas see what would convince them of the truth that he is the “incomparable trainer of men to be tamed” and thereby won them over to acceptance of right conduct (and, in some instances, to enlightenment: e.g. the brāhmaṇa Pokkharasādi of the Ambaṭṭha Sutta, DN 3).

I am still not particularly impressed that the Buddha could display those thirty-two marks that the brāhmaṇas believed to be the signs of a great man, for I suspect that even Devadatta could have done so; but these Suttas were not addressed to me. They were intended to inspire faith in the brāhmaṇas, who believed in their lore as we do in ours. More impressive is the display of wisdom that uses, rather than disputes with, cultural limitations to lead one to what transcends such limitations. I still have no special use in my own practice for those “thirty-two marks” Suttas, nor for others which, it seems, are also intended for those with a different sensibility—e.g. DN 14 on previous Buddhas and the birth of Bodhisattas; MN 129 on hell-realms and world-monarchs—but they are no longer a basis for doubt and skepticism, or a barrier to acquiescence in what is beneficial⁵⁵. The lesson being, that it is

⁵⁴ In the Brahmāyu Sutta, MN 91/M II 133-46, after the marks are displayed, then additionally the Buddha’s conduct is held up to close critical scrutiny over an extended period of time before he is finally acknowledged to be a “great man.”

⁵⁵ This account of these “thirty-two marks” Suttas will probably satisfy those who come to the Teaching from a rationalistic culture; but there may well be other explanations, suited to those with a different background, no less valid than what is offered here. Whatever increases faith in right-view guidance is proper. “They who have faith in the noble eightfold path have faith in the highest. They who have faith in the highest have the highest

not an act of wisdom to judge and reject discourses on the basis of personal preference or belief (ref. the Kalama Sutta, AN 3:65 (I 188–93)), for if we do so, we then lose the possibility of transcending those preferences and beliefs.

Is it possible, then, to set forth a reasonable standard whereby, when we find ourselves encountering one of those “thorny barriers,” we can act reasonably? Perhaps the following will be relevant.

Having already acquired an overview of the Suttas—as one might inspect the general contours of a road map prior to setting out on a journey, without excessive concern for specific details—we will have noticed that certain passages are found repeatedly, with little variation, throughout the four Nikāyas. If we have the Buddha’s Teaching at all, then surely we have it here: it would be the wildest irresponsibility to assume that the gist of the Teaching is found only outside these core texts. Not only must we accept them as authentic, but also as fundamental, of the essence, for why else would they be so often repeated? These texts can be trusted as being that right-view guidance we have been seeking. Should any of these oft-repeated discourses seem discrepant with one another or with our own views, then this is evidence that there is a difficulty in our own understanding which needs to be uncovered and resolved (or abandoned).

We should be in no rush to judge. These Teachings cannot be understood except from their own point of view, and coming to understand that point of view is a growth that takes, usually, more time than we think it will. And we should be careful to take the Suttas quite literally, as saying what they mean and meaning what they say. They speak often of knowing both the letter and the spirit; nowhere do they advise an interpretive approach. We need to change ourselves, not the world, and the world includes the Suttas. To interpret is still to follow our own notions, rather than right-view guidance. Indeed, to interpret is to *deny* (“...when he says *black* what he *really* means is...”).

With this background established, then those discourses which are found but once or twice can be considered. The bulk of them will present no difficulty. They will be seen to be in accordance with the root-texts, being variations or expansions on a theme, as too will those texts which we have identified as later additions to the four Nikāyas. But should any of them seem to be in contradiction with one’s own understanding, then there is an opportunity to examine that understanding, to discover what needs to be surrendered⁵⁶. However, if one is not yet at a stage of development where such acquiescence is possible, then that Sutta can be set aside (which is not to say rejected) until a time when understanding and calmness have been developed sufficiently so that a reconsideration of the text will be useful. By following such a practice one can come to know that, indeed, this Teaching is well-expounded, immediate, non-temporal, evident, leading, to be known individually by the wise.

We set out in search of a guide whereby we could find the way to resolve the root-problem of our personal existence. We have discovered that the Teaching of a Fully Awakened One is at hand, and that there is reason to trust, not reason to doubt, that Teaching. What remains is to put that Teaching to use, to make it a personal reality. Restraint, renunciation and purification are difficult, not easy. But indulgence, attachment and defilements can never lead to happiness and peace. What needs to be done is clear. We have reached an end of our inquiry ready, at last, to begin.

results.”—AN 4:54/A II 34; translated in the Wheel No. 8.

⁵⁶ On this point, see the Dīghanakha Sutta, MN 74/M I 497-501, and the Cintā Sutta, SN 55:41/S V 446-8.

Appendix

At the beginning of the century, when the Buddha's Teaching had only recently come to widespread notice in the West, many questions were yet unsettled. Although it was already recognized except, perhaps, among those most hostile, that the Buddha was rather more than a primitive sun-myth, yet many other mistaken ideas were being put forward to explain, or to explain away, the Buddha and his Teaching. Some of these notions sound today quite as naive as the sun-myth theory: but others, despite the evidence, continue to be raised (hence the preceding essay). Doctrinal matters aside, the most fundamental of these concern the place of Pāli as a language in Indian history and thought, and the dates of composition and compilation of the various Canonical texts.

Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids—unquestionably the most influential of the early scholars concerned with Buddhism—dealt with these questions at length in various articles and books, the most comprehensive and easily available of which is *Buddhist India*. Published in 1903, although it is touched both by a lingering Victorian ethnocentricism and, doctrinal matters aside, by some lesser judgments since demonstrated to be erroneous, it is nevertheless the earliest general statement of what is, in the main, the accepted view on these questions today.

Although a scholarly examination of these questions will never yield an understanding of the Teaching, yet mistaken notions may well be an obstacle to comprehension. Some, therefore, will find a certain amount of investigation into these points to be of value. While the question of the place of Pāli as a language and of the date of the Vinaya have not been part of our inquiry, yet it may be pertinent to quote briefly on these subjects.

On the first point, Rhys Davids concludes that there existed at the time of the Buddha “a language common among the cultured laity ... which bore to the local dialect much the same relation as the English of London, in Shakespeare's time, bore to the various dialects spoken in Somersetshire, Yorkshire, and Essex”; that this “conversational dialect” was in use “not only throughout the Kosala dominions, but east and west from Delhi to Patna, and north and south from Sāvathī to Avanti”; and that on this dialect was based “Middle High Indian, Pali, the literary language.”[1]

A scholarly debate has been in progress for the last fifty years (with no end in sight) challenging and defending this judgment. It should be noted, then, that even a “worst-case scenario,” namely, a conclusive and convincing demonstration that Pāli was not the language spoken by the Buddha (but see DN 16 (Ii 108)), would not require us to change anything in this essay. For if, as some contend, Pāli is a western Prakrit while the Buddha spoke an Eastern dialect, all that would be demonstrated is that the final editorial work on the texts was done by monks who hailed from western India. In this regard we should note that the account of the Second Council in the Vinaya repeatedly describes the orthodox monks as being from the West, and the heretics as being from the East. And if, as others contend, Pāli as we now have it postdates the Buddha by a century or more, then all that would be demonstrated thereby is that at the Second Council (and, for the Khuddaka, the Third) the decision was made to “modernize” the language⁵⁷. There would be in neither case any need to question the authenticity of the Teaching as we have it.

On the second point we may turn to Rhys David's *History and Literature of Buddhism* (the “American Lectures”) of 1896 wherein, early in Lecture VI, he remarks:

... the first disruption in the Order took place ... on matters connected with the regulation of the Order itself. One hundred years after the death of the Buddha, according to the oldest account ... there arose a certain party in the Order which proclaimed and practiced a loosening of the rules in ten particulars ...

⁵⁷ In this regard we should note that at the time of the Second Council, North Indian settlements had evolved in social differentiation to the point of being on the verge of coalescing into the sub-continent's first empire (the Mauryan: Chandragupta, Bindusāra, Asoka, etc.) of this inter-glacial period. These centuries were by all accounts times of great social upheavals, and it may be expected that—as with English today—language would have been subject to considerable diffraction.

To put an end to the disputes upon these points, a Council of the leading members of the Order was held at Vesāli and the heretical opinions were condemned. The long-continued struggle on the question—as important for the history of Buddhism as the Arian controversy for that of Christianity—agitated the whole Buddhist world to its very center ...

Now the ten indulgences are each summed up in a single word: and these words are, each and all of them, conspicuous by their absence from the Books on the laws and regulations of the Order included in the canon (i.e. the Vinaya), except that they appear in an historical account added quite evidently as an appendix (i.e. the Twelfth Khandhaka, discussed in our essay), to the collection of treatises, or Khandhakas ... This fact is of the very greatest importance in determining the date at which those Khandhakas must have been composed. The ten points in dispute were all matters of ecclesiastical law. They all related to observances of the Brotherhood. Is it probable that, in a set of rules and treatises which seek to set forth, down to the minutest detail, and even with hair-splitting diffuseness, all that has any relation to the daily life of the Brethren and the regulation of the Buddhist Order—is it probable that, in such a collection, if, when it was compiled, the struggle on these ten points had already burst into flame, there should be no reference at all, even in interpolations, to any one of these ten disputes? That the difference of opinion on each of the ten points remains altogether unnoticed in that part of the rules and treatises where, in the natural order of things, it would obviously be referred to—that the rules are not in any way altered to cover, or to suggest, any decision on the points in dispute,—and that they are mentioned only in an appendix (= the Twelfth Khandhaka), where the Council held to decide them is described, shows clearly that the rules and treatises, as we have them, must have been put together before the time when the Council of Vesali (= the Second Council) was held.

Lastly, on the question which has concerned us at length—the date of the Suttas—we offer relevant excerpts from Chapter X of *Buddhist India*:

... As to the age of the Buddhist canonical books, the best evidence is the contents of the books themselves—the sort of words they use, the style in which they are composed, the ideas they express. Objection, it is true, has recently been raised against the use of such internal evidence. And the objection is valid if it be urged, not against the general principle of the use of such evidence, but against the wrong use of it. We find, for instance, that Phallus-worship is often mentioned, quite as a matter of course, in the Mahābhārata, as if it had always been common everywhere throughout Northern India. In the Nikāyas, though they mention all sorts of what the Buddhists regarded as foolish or superstitious forms of worship, this particular kind, Siva-worship under the form of the Linga, is not even once referred to. The Mahābhārata mentions the Atharva Veda, and takes it as a matter of course, as if it were an idea generally current, that it was a Veda the fourth Veda. The Nikāyas constantly mention the three others, but never the Atharva. Both cases are interesting. But before drawing the conclusion that, therefore the Nikāyas, as we have them, are older than the existing text of the Mahābhārata, we should want a very much larger number of such cases, all tending the same way, and also the certainty that there were no cases of an opposite tendency that could not otherwise be explained.

On the other hand, suppose a MS. were discovered containing, in the same handwriting, copies of Bacon's *Essays* and of Hume's *Essay*, with nothing to show when, or by whom, they were written; and that we knew nothing at all otherwise about the matter. Still we should know, with absolute certainty, which was relatively the older of the two; and should be able to determine, within a quite short period, the actual date of each of the two works. The evidence would be irresistible because it would consist of a very large number of minute points of language, of style, and, above all, of ideas expressed, all tending in the same direction.

This is the sort of internal evidence that we have before us in the Pāli books. Any one who habitually reads Pāli would know at once that the Nikāyas are older than the Dhammasaṅgaṇī; that both are older than the Kathāvatthu; that all three are older than the Milinda. And the Pāli scholars most competent to judge are quite unanimous on the point, and on the general position of the Pāli literature in the history of literature in India.

But this sort of evidence can appeal, of course, only to those familiar with the language and with the ideas. To those who are not, the following points may be suggestive:

On the monuments of the third century B.C. we find the names of donors of different parts of the building inscribed on those parts (pillars, rails, and bas-reliefs). When the names are common ones, certain epithets are added, to distinguish the donors from other persons bearing the same name. Such epithets are either local (as we might say, John of Winchester) or they specify an occupation (as we might say, John the carpenter, or John the clerk) or are otherwise distinctive. Among these epithets have been found the following:

1. *Dhamma-kathika*.—"Preacher of the system" (the Dhamma)—the "System" being a technical term in the Buddhist schools to signify the philosophical and ethical doctrine as distinguished from the Vinaya, the Rules of the Order.
2. *Peṭṭakin*.—"One who had (that is, knew by heart) the Piṭaka." The Piṭaka⁵⁸ is the traditional statements of Buddhist doctrine as contained in the Sutta Piṭaka (= the five Nikāyas). The word means basket, and, as a technical term applied to a part of their literature, it is used exclusively by the Buddhists.
3. *Suttantika*.—"A man who knows a Suttanta (= Sutta) by heart."
4. *Suttantakini*.—"A woman who knows a Suttanta by heart." Suttanta is, again, a technical term used exclusively of certain portions of the Buddhist canonical books, more especially of the Dialogs....⁵⁹
5. *Pañca nekāyika*.—"One who knows the Five Nikāyas by heart." The five Nikāyas, or "Collections," as a technical term used of literary works, is applied to the canonical Buddhist texts, and to them only....

The expressions here explained are used on Buddhist monuments and refer to Buddhist books. They are conclusive proof that some time before the date of the inscriptions (that is, roughly speaking, before the time of Asoka), there was a Buddhist literature in North India, where the inscriptions are found. And further, that that literature then had divisions known by the technical names of Piṭaka, Nikāya, and Suttanta, and that the number of Nikāyas then in existence was five.

But this is not all. Asoka, in his Bhabra Edict, addressed to the Buddhist Order (the Sangha), recommends to the Brethren and Sisters of the Order, and to the lay disciples of either sex, frequently to hear (that is to learn by heart) and to meditate upon, certain selected passages. And of these he, most fortunately, gives the names. They are as follows:

Ariya-vasāni (now found in the Dīgha Nikāya, in the portion called the Sangiti Suttanta).

Anāgata-bhayāni (now found in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, vol. II pp. 105–108).

Muni Gāthā (now found in the Sutta Nipāta, verses 206–220).

Moneyya Sutta (now found in the Itivuttaka, p. 67, and also in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, vol. I p. 272).

Upatissa Pasina.—"The questions put by Upatissa" (more commonly known as Sāriputta). There are so many such questions in the books that opinions differ as to which of them is the one most probably referred to.

There is a word at the commencement of this list which may either be an adjective applied to the whole list or the name of another passage. However this may be, this Edict of Asoka's gives the actual titles of some of the shorter passages included, in his time, in those books, the larger divisions of which are mentioned in the inscriptions just referred to.

Now the existing literature, divided into the same larger divisions, contains also the shorter passages. To suppose that it was composed in Ceylon is to suppose that, by an extraordinary

⁵⁸ Piṭaka, like Nikāya, is a later term, not found in this technical sense in the Suttas.

⁵⁹ By "Dialogues" Rhys Davids means the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas.

series of chances, the Ceylon writers happened to hit upon just the identical technical terms, two of them then almost fallen out of use, that had been used in these old inscriptions (of which they knew nothing) for the names they gave to the larger divisions of the literature they made. And we must further suppose that, by another extraordinary series of chances, they happened to include in those divisions a number of shorter passages, each of them corresponding exactly to those mentioned by name, long before their time, in Asoka's Edict, of which also they knew nothing. To adopt such a theory as the most probable explanation of the facts would be nothing less than absurd....

We must take our Pāli canonical books then to be North Indian, not Singhalese in origin: and the question as to whether they have suffered from their sometime sojourn under the palm groves of the mountain *vihāras* in the south⁶⁰ must be decided by a critical study of them in their present condition. Towards such a study there are some points that can already be made.

The books make no mention of Asoka. Had they undergone any serious re-editing after the reign of the great Buddhist Emperor (of whom the Buddhist writers, whether rightly or wrongly, were so proud), is it probable that he would have been so completely ignored?

The books never mention any person, or any place, in Ceylon; or even in South India⁶¹. They tell us a goodly number of anecdotes, usually as introductions to, or in illustration of, some ethical point. It would have been so easy to bring in a passing reference to some Ceylon worthy—in the same way as the brahmin Buddhaghosa does so often, in his *Atthasālinī*, which *was* revised in Ceylon⁶². If the Piṭaka books had been tampered with, would not opportunity have been taken to yield to this very natural impulse?

We know a great deal now of developed or corrupted doctrine current in Ceylon, of new technical terms invented, of new meanings put into the older phrases. Not one single instance has yet been found of any such later idea, any such later form of language, any such later technical term in any one of the canonical books....

It would seem, then, that any change that may have been made in these North Indian books after they had been brought into Ceylon must have been insignificant. It would be a great advantage if we should be able to find even one or two instances of such changes. We should then be able to say what sort and degree of alteration the Ceylon scholars felt justified in making. But it is clear that they regarded the canon as closed.

While the books were in North India, on the other hand, and the canon was not considered closed, there is evidence of a very different tone. One whole book, the *Katha Vatthu*⁶³, was added as late as the time of Asoka; and perhaps the *Parivāra*⁶⁴, a mere string of examination questions, is not much older. One story in the *Petavattu*[10] is about a king Piṅgalaka, said in the commentary to have reigned over Surat two hundred years after the Buddha's time; and another refers to an event fifty-six years after the Buddha's death. The latter is certainly in its right place in this odd collection of legends. The former may (as the commentator thinks) have been added

⁶⁰ *Vihāras* = temples, monasteries. By "in the south" Rhys Davids means Ceylon (where live the Singhalese people.)

⁶¹ The single exception, overlooked by Rhys Davids, is in the *Udāna* (*Khuddaka Nikāya*), wherein it is stated that Bāhiya Dārucīriya travelled from his dwelling at Suppāraka to Sāvattī to learn the Buddha's Teaching. Suppāraka has been identified with Sopāra, a town just north of Bombay. However, this instance strengthens, rather than weakens, Rhys Davids' argument, for it shows that the compilers of the *Udāna*, though they knew something of South India, yet had no interest or reason to make more than this single passing reference to it. (Compare, on knowledge of distant parts, MN 93 (II 149).) This could hardly have been the case had there been editorial treatment of the texts at a time when the Teaching had already penetrated southward into Kāliṅga (Orissa) and beyond.

⁶² Buddhaghosa was the compiler of most of the traditional commentaries, including the *Atthasālinī* (compiled, not revised, in Ceylon): c. fifth Century, A.D., from South India. (Although the Commentaries were translated from Sinhalese into Pāli and compiled at that time, they probably "ceased to grow by about the middle of the first century A.D."—Adikaram, *op. cit.* p. 41)

⁶³ In the *Abhidhamma* collection, not *Sutta*.

⁶⁴ Now attached to the *Vinaya* (see footnote 46 of our essay).

at Asoka's Council. Even if it were, that would be proof that they thought no harm of then adding to the legendary matter in their texts⁶⁵. And the whole of the Vimāna Vatthu[10] (really only the other half of one and the same work), is certainly very late in tone as compared with the Nikāyas.

The same must be said of two other short collections of ballads. One is the Buddhavaṃsa, [10] containing a separate poem on each of twenty-five Buddhas, supposed to have followed one another in succession. The other is the Cariyāpiṭaka⁶⁶, containing thirty-four short Jātaka stories turned into verse. Both of these must also be late. For in the Nikāyas only seven Buddhas are known; and Jātakas, in the technical sense, are not yet thought of. This particular set of Jātakas is also arranged on the basis of the *pāramitās*, a doctrine that plays no part in the older books. The Ten Perfections (*pāramitās*) are qualities a Buddha is supposed to be obliged to have acquired in the countless series of his previous rebirths as Bodhisatta. But this is a later notion, not found in the Nikāyas. It gradually grew up as the Bodhisattva idea began to appeal more to the Indian mind. And it is interesting to find already, in these latest of the canonical books, the germs of what afterwards developed into the later Mahāyāna doctrine, to which the decline of Buddhism, in the opinion of Professor Bhandarkar, was eventually so greatly due..."

Postscript⁶⁷

This much having been said about the Pāli Suttas, it remains to say a few words concerning accessibility.

The texts have been published in many scripts. Roman-script editions the texts are available from the Pāli Text Society, England (<http://www.palitext.com>). The Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, India, has digitalized the whole Sixth Council edition of the Tipitaka and many other Pali Texts in digital, searchable format. It is distributed on a CD ROM and is also online at <http://www.tipitaka.org>. A very inexpensive edition is or used to be available in Devanagari script—only the script need be learned, not the language—from Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007, India. Both publishers offer free catalogs.

The P.T.S. also publishes grammars, dictionaries and other aids to learning this not very difficult language. Less costly grammars have been produced in Sri Lanka by Ven. A. P. Buddhadatta, Ven. Nārada Mahāthera, and others. The *New Course in Reading Pali*, by Gair & Karunatilake is published by Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi, India. A new Pali grammar by Steven Collins is published by Silkworm Books, Thailand. Inexpensive dictionaries compiled by Ven. Buddhadatta are the *Concise Pali English Dictionary* and the *English-Pali Dictionary*. They are available from various publishers in India and Sri Lanka. They have been digitalized and can be downloaded from <http://www.bps.lk>.

More information on learning Pali can be found at the Access to Insight website:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bullitt/learningpali.html>

The P.T.S. offers English translations of the five Nikāyas (of which the most reliable renderings are K. R. Norman's translation of Thera-Theri-gāthā as *Elders' Verses I, II* and the Suttanipāta as *The Group of Discourses* respectively). Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA, offers translations of the Majjhima Nikāya by Ven. Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, called *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, the Saṃyutta Nikāya by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, called *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (also available from P.T.S.), and a translation of the Dīgha Nikāya by Maurice Walshe called *Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's revised and expanded edition of Nyanaponika Thera's *Aṅguttara Nikāya Anthology* (published by the BPS) called has been published by Alta Mira under the name *Numerical Sayings of the Buddha*.

⁶⁵ We think it more likely that the entire Petavatthu, and the Vimānavatthu as well, were added to the Khuddaka Nikāya in the Second or Third Century B.E.

⁶⁶ Of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

⁶⁷ A lot of things have changed since Ven. Bodhesako wrote the postscript and it has therefore been revised. BPS Editor.

An inexpensive edition of ninety suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya, called *A Treasury of the Buddha's Words*, translated by Ven. Ñāṇamoli Thera, has been published by Mahāmakut Rajavidyalaya Press, Bangkok. The Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) publishes a nice translation of the Udāna and Itivuttaka by John D. Ireland called *The Udāna and the Itivuttaka*, and a reliable translation of the Dhammapada (along with the Pali) by Ven. Buddhārakkhita. Ven. Ñāṇamoli's *Life of the Buddha* (BPS) is a well-selected and well-translated anthology. The BPS also publishes reliable translations⁶⁸ of selected texts, available in the *Wheel* series. For a fuller listing of texts, translations, anthologies and linguistic aids, see Russell Webb's *An Analysis of the Pāḷi Canon* (B.P.S., *The Wheel* No. 217–220).

From a letter written by the author

As for *Beginnings*, it was intended to serve a very different purpose from *Change*. Most people adopt a point of view because it happens to fit in with the group they happen to join up with or because it is supportive of other choices they've already made—in other words, the point of view is, for them, secondary, and what is primary is their own personal wishes ... There are also two other groups for whom the essay was written, although they are not specifically singled out.

First there are those who are already committed to a Sutta approach and who have a measure of *saddhā* in the content of the texts, but who might find that this faith is bolstered and enhanced by an account which is addressed to some of the questions which are raised concerning the derivation of those texts.

The other group to whom the essay was "secretly" addressed is that of Westerners who though following a Theravāda tradition are doing so under the guidance of a living (or recently deceased) teacher rather than the Suttas. It was partly in the hope of undermining the anti-Sutta views of this group that the essay was also written.

This group, of course, has a problem inasmuch as they cannot deny the Suttas totally without denying their own teachers, who are supposedly following the tradition of the Buddha; but on the other hand they also cannot accept the Suttas totally without denying their teachers, who are teaching doctrines which simply don't fully square with the Suttas. Few of them will bother to think through the consequences of this problem, since they didn't accept whatever doctrine they are following because of the doctrine but because it was either part of the apparatus of the group they joined up with or else because it is, in their view anyway, a means of justifying the choices that they would have made anyway. But those who are willing to consider the problem of their situation (every situation has its problems, of course, I don't mean to suggest that their situation has problems and mine doesn't; only that the problems of their situation are not the same problems as mine—by problems I mean philosophical or epistemological problems, not the personal problem that is in every situation), to ask themselves whether the choices they are making are not, as a whole, internally inconsistent, may be influenced by the essay, at least to the extent of being challenged to think for themselves ...

Of course, an historical argument is not in itself going to establish *saddhā* in the Suttas; all I would expect that it might do is to provide sufficient incentive for a few people to investigate the Suttas sufficiently (and with a suitably-predisposing attitude towards acquiescence) that such *saddhā* will have a chance to grow for more personal and fundamental reasons.

About the Author

Sāmaṇera Bodhesako (Robert Smith) was an American Buddhist monk. Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1939, he studied at the University of Iowa, specializing in Literature and Creative Writing. He embraced Buddhism in 1966 in India, where he was ordained at the Bengal Buddhist Association of

⁶⁸ On the other hand, one must beware of a few mass-marketed "translations" (particularly of the Dhammapada) which grossly misrepresent the Teaching, either by gratuitously mistranslating certain key terminology, or by acting so free and loose with the text in general as not to deserve to be called a translation.

Calcutta, and spent several years as a monk in Sri Lanka. After leaving the robe in 1971, in 1980 he again took ordination, this time in Thailand under the Venerable Somdet Nāṇasaṃvara of Wat Bovornives. In 1982 he returned to Sri Lanka, living mostly in the upcountry region of Bandarawela. In 1988, while on a return journey to the United States to join his father for the latter's eightieth birthday celebration, Ven. Bodhesako died from a sudden intestinal hernia while in Kathmandu.

Sāmaṇera Bodhesako's other B.P.S. publications are the essay *The Buddha and Catch-22* (Bodhi Leaves 110), *The Tragic, the Comic, and the Personal: Selected Letters of Nāṇavīra Thera* (Wheel No. 339/341). During the last years of his life he founded the Path Press for which he edited *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nāṇavīra Thera* (Colombo, 1987). He is also the author of *Change* (Colombo, 1988).

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